The Dissertation Committee for Benjamin William Koerber certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

The Aesthetics and Politics of Rumor: The Making of Egyptian Public Culture

Committee:

Tarek El-Ariss, Supervisor

Kristen Brustad

Samer Ali

Mahmoud Al-Batal

Moneera Al-Ghadeer

The Aesthetics and Politics of Rumor: The Making of Egyptian Public Culture

by

Benjamin William Koerber, B.A., M.A.

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The Aesthetics and Politics of Rumor: The Making of Egyptian Public Culture

Benjamin William Koerber, Ph.D.

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Supervisor: Tarek El-Ariss

Whether as a distinct cultural form, or as a problem exaggerated and imagined by a paranoid interpretive bent, "rumor" (*al-ishāʿa*) claims a place in the writings of many Egyptian intellectuals, littérateurs, journalists, and politicians in the twentieth century that has yet to be adequately addressed and theorized. At the intersection of cultural studies and Arabic literature, this dissertation investigates rumor as a fiercely contested mode of reading and writing public culture in Egypt since 1952. Eschewing the legislative trend in the modern social and clinical sciences that has positioned rumor as an object to be combatted, or reduced it to the mechanisms and motives of mass psychology, I examine some of the many ways in which it generates, animates, or interferes with scenes in the lives of social actors as they move between the centers and peripheries of power. Rumor possesses both affirmative and destructive powers, often inseparably, and in order to theorize its complex imbrications with character, community, and culture beyond the urge to evaluative critique, I develop a host of concepts – such as noise, play, paranoia, and parody – capable of bringing this oft-neglected ambivalence into view.

Notoriously resistant to analysis, whether due to is conceptual vagueness or ephemeral phenomenological status, rumor and the scenes it makes require a rethinking of the modes of scholarly writing that dominate the humanities and social sciences. A

degree of mobility and eclecticism, drawn from the object itself in its flight across history and culture, imbues the organization and style of this dissertation: rumor is the object, and inspires the mode, of my investigation. Each of the three Parts of the dissertation investigates a different field of public culture in post-1952 Egypt. Part 1 analyzes the rhetoric and interpretive practices deployed by state actors in their confrontation with what they call "rumors." Three historical events are taken as significant: the rhetorical and dramatic performances of the Free Officers in the early revolutionary period (1952-1954), the social scientific celebration of "planning" (*takhṭīṭ*) in 1964, and the Mubarak death rumors of 2007. While here rumor comes into view as the object of state discipline and paranoid interpretation, the remaining two Parts investigate its role in the performances of artists, littérateurs, and bloggers. Part 2 analyzes the literary texts of Gamal al-Ghitani, which are unique in their simultaneous recording and performing of rumors in Egyptian cultural politics at the turn of the millennium. Finally, Part 3 examines intersections between play, parody, and the paranoid style of interpretation in cyberspace, including an investigation into the blogging campaign "Mubarak Mat" ("Mubarak has Died," 2008) and Ashraf Hamdi's response to rumors spun by the counterrevolution (2011-2012). While rumor, across these many contexts, is deplored as a destructive force, it also, I contend, salvages possibility from necessity, explores alternatives to the status quo, and serves as an unexpected catalyst for innovative cultural and political forms. As noise, it creates disorder and generates a new order. It is at once *in* public culture, and *making* public culture.

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Note on Translation and Transliteration

All translations from the Arabic are mine unless otherwise indicated. For transliterations of Modern Standard Arabic, I follow the transliteration guide of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (*IJMES*) throughout, with the exception of the accepted English spellings of names like Gamal Abdel Nasser and Muhammad Naguib. For transliterations of Egyptian Arabic, I follow the standard set by Hinds and Badawi in their compendious *A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic*.

List of Figures

"Egypt is a country of gossip! A country of gossipiness! A country of rumors!"
– ʿAmr Adib, "Cairo Today" (March, 2010)

"We live in a society that fires rumors like bullets."
– Muhammad ʿAbd al-Wahid, *Intellectuals for Hire* (2005: 318)

"Our history is nothing but a rumor."
– Nizar Qabbani, "Our History is Nothing but a Rumor" (1991)

"Why is Rumor here?" The question is posed by the beast itself who, "painted full of tongues,"

appears in, and as, the induction to Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part Two*. Rumor, the plaything of

the "wav'ring multitude," is the carrier of "slanders" and "false reports." He and/or she – the

personification of windy speech is afforded a rather ambiguous gender – blows into the ears of

men, and is blown itself by their "surmises, jealousies, conjectures." Let us, as groundlings in

this theater, surmise: Rumor is here, in *Henry IV*, because of war and rebellion. In the opening

act, the Earl of Northumberland eagerly awaits for news of the Battle of Shrewsbury, in which

his son contends with the army of the king. Matters of fate are being determined by the minute,

but the battlefield is distant and enveloped in a fulgurous epistemic fog. In the absence of

reliable eyewitnesses – or rather, with their proliferation and mutual contradiction – it is the

voice of Rumor that makes itself heard, swift as Mercury, arriving at the Earl's gates before the

battle has ended; it carries hope, then consolation, then condolences, before the slow truth is able

to mutter a word. So Rumor is *here*, at the gates; Rumor is also *ere*, that is, before: it is the

introduction to the play, setting a scene and creating an atmosphere, not simply destroying order

but giving birth to one that is new and beating with life.

Rumor's question, posed broadly beyond the confines of Shakespeare's play, challenges the audience to consider a knot of issues related to epistemology, discourse ethics, power, and social change, as well as their representation in myriad cultural forms from theater to everyday conversation. This dissertation offers one response through an investigation into significant scenes in Egyptian public culture over the last sixty years, and the actors that have made them. By way of induction, I direct the question to the three quotations above: in each of these statements, terse aphorisms or shrill laments, Why is *Rumor* here? These are the voices of disparately placed actors: a rambunctious television personality in Cairo; an insider escaped from Egypt's Ministry of Culture; and a renowned Syrian poet. Each in his own way has pushed, or been pushed by, *al-ishāʿa* ("rumor") onto different but overlapping stages: "Egypt" or the television audience so addressed; Egyptian "society" and in particular its "intellectuals"; and lastly, Arab national(ist) history. Each has, in other words, encountered rumor as a significant problem – a question, an object of concern, an anxiety – lodged in, indeed constitutive of, these overlapping realms of action, experience, knowledge, and affect. Why is *al-ishāʿa* here?

The first quotation was shouted by ʿAmr Adib, host of the talk show "Cairo Today," in one of his characteristic nighttime rants on the loquaciousness and gullibility of his viewers, the television-bound people of Egypt. On this occasion in March, 2010, Adib was performing an enraged denial of the recent flurry of rumors about the death of President Husni Mubarak, who had fallen ill during a trip to Germany. Doctors in Heidelberg University Hospital diagnosed the president with "chronic calculus cholecystitis," which had necessitated the removal of "both the gallbladder and duodenal polyp, safely": but medical jargon proved not to be a convincing rhetorical strategy, and the regime and its allies – which included Adib – found themselves

bracing against a tide of public skepticism and curiosity.[1] This was not the first time that reports of Mubarak's death had mobilized the president's apologists into action. Nor was this Adib's first jab at combatting rumors: viewers of his show may recall his repeated attempts to verbally resuscitate the major political, religious, and cultural icons of Egypt's incumbent gerontocracy, whose rumored passings prompted at least four episodes of "Cairo Today" within a one-year period.[2] This was yet another opportunity gleefully exploited by the newsmonger to broadcast a common stereotype: "Egypt is a country of rumors," and "Egyptians" are porous vessels of hearsay. This stereotype is undoubtedly given currency by rumor outbreaks like those that consumed ʿAmr Adib in 2010. More fundamentally, however, it is a perception enabled by years of secrecy and military rule, which have built into public life hierarchies of suspicion and wide gaps of information; by paternalistic modes of address that position citizens as "children" in need of "upbringing" (*tarbiya*) and "guidance" (*irshād*); by the lingering syntax of developmentalism that subjects the "masses" to half-serious campaigns of "consciousness raising" (*tawʿiya*); by self-styled intellectuals both foreign and Egyptian, who earn a living by portraying the "Arab Street" as a zone of radical epistemological alterity, vulnerable to infiltration by folk beliefs, fundamentalists, and foreign conspirators. At the confluence of these many streams, ʿAmr Adib speaks, and grabs "rumor" as an object of cultural lament.

The second quotation is excerpted from *Intellectuals for Hire* (*Muthaqqafun taht al-Talab*), an "exposé" of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture under the eccentric Faruq Husni, published in 2005 by one of the minister's former media advisors. Muhammad ʿAbd al-Wahid, the author, reproduces ʿAmr Adib's lament, but narrows its object in two senses. First, his

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[1] "Mubarak on the mend after successful gall bladder surgery," *France 24*, 3/6/2010.

[2] From mid-2009 to mid-2010, "Cairo Today" performed rituals of denial on the deaths of Husni Mubarak, Fathi Surur (the Speaker of Parliament), Pope Shenouda III (the Patriarch of Egypt's Coptic community), and ʿAdil Imam (the froggish cinema and television actor). At the time of writing, they are rumored alive – with the exception of Pope Shenouda III.

concerns are focused on the intellectual and political classes – in particular, those absorbed in the Ministry of Culture – and not Egyptian society as a whole (though, of course, this wider implication is also made). He declares that for "intellectuals … slander and entertaining conspiracies seem to be the elixir of life and a savory pastime," but contends that the "real" scandals in "Egyptian culture" – to which he is privy, but does not divulge – exceed those passed around by word of mouth (318). Second, whereas Adib speaks of rumors that have erupted seemingly spontaneously, taking advantage of a gullible public, ʿAbd al-Wahid speaks of rumors as "bullets" – that is, they have not only fixed form, but also agents, clear trajectories, and targets. Rumor is here as a form of sabotage, a weapon deployed by morally depraved culture workers against their opponents. Yet what is truly striking about both Adib's rant and ʿAbd al-Wahid's critique is that both men are implicated, in the same moment, in the very practice they are condemning. Adib, for his part, spoke loudly as a mouthpiece for the Mubarak regime's own rumors and propaganda; ʿAbd al-Wahid, it seems, does not realize that his exposé of Faruq Husni is by definition the stuff of gossip and slander. This is a perennial paradox in the politics of rumor: those who most fervently denounce it are also its most avid and skillful practitioners.

Finally, the third quotation, "Our history is nothing but a rumor," is taken from a free-verse elegy of that name by the Syrian poet, Nizar Qabbani (1923-1998), in his collection *Marginal Notes on the Marginal Notes, 1967-1991* (1991). The "history" of which the poet speaks he had received as a child in school; its major themes were the "bravery," "sacrifice," "pride," and "magnanimity" of his forefathers. In his old age, he has discovered that all this was nothing but *ishāʿa*, "a rumor." What Qabbani, or his poetic persona, has thus achieved is a subversion of Arab nationalism's historical metanarrative, with its claims of ethnic superiority rooted in a glorious past, and canonized in school textbooks and performed in national media.

By refiguring this metanarrative as rumor, the poet dissolves its consistency, authoritativeness, and aesthetic sublimity into the ephemerality, distortion, and vulgarity of reported speech. The dominant myth is not simply a lie, but belongs to that peculiar mode of discourse, *al-ishāʿa*, which is not merely false (or uncertain), but phenomenologically unstable, with no certain temporal or spatial coordinates. Written during the Second Gulf War (1990-1991), the poem may be read as a specific inversion of the rhetoric deployed by authoritarian regimes in the region, such as Iraq, that dismissed opponents both foreign and domestic as agents of "rumor." Instead it is the Iraqi regime itself that, unable to support its myths of contemporary and historical grandeur, is exposed as the true teller of tall tales. In yet another sense, "history is nothing but a rumor" because, as Yoav Di-Capua has demonstrated for Egypt, historians of the postcolonial Arab World have had their efforts seriously undermined by government secrecy, the lack of official records for major events, and the suppression of voices that refuse to repeat the official narrative.[3] As a result, rumor, hearsay, and smuggled documents are the only materials available to reconstruct the past. This is of course not only the case for the writing of history, but for the interpretation of contemporary events as well: official secrecy drives readers of the present, from ordinary citizens to salaried pundits, to listen to rumor's many tongues. Whatever the specific sense of his line, Qabbani has placed rumor here as an epistemological problem for many Arab countries. While my focus in this dissertation is on contemporary Egypt, Qabbani's poem points to wider areas of investigation and comparison for future studies to consider.

Why, then, is Rumor here? I have begun by casting a very wide net, in order to offer a brief glimpse of the broader significance that may accrue to this object in its flight across different fields of practice in the Arab World – journalism, politics, history, aesthetics. The focus

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[3] See, for example, Di-Capua (2009: 325) and (2012: 88) on the problems posed to historians by secrecy and the lack of state archives.

of this dissertation, however, is considerably narrower. Setting the place as Egyptian public culture, and the time as that marked by the beginning of military rule in 1952, I ask not only why rumor is here, but what it can tell us about the actors who produce it, as well as the actors that attempt to combat it. On the one hand, rumor is a distinct *cultural form*, a fantastical narrative bite written to varying degrees by different people in order to make sense of an obscure event, to express latent social or psychological tensions, or simply to play. As Luise White has argued, rumor can "reveal an intellectual world of fears and fantasies, ideas and claims that have not been studied before" in the texts of literature and history (2000: 86). Rumor may also be used as a tool of sabotage, as a weapon of both the weak and the powerful (e.g. Scott 1990), and thus allows us to theorize "politics by other means," beyond the formal sets of action and agency offered by traditional political science. On the other hand, "rumor" is not a specific thing in the world, but a *problem* that is feared, interpreted, and combatted by groups and individuals at particular moments of social crisis, real or perceived. In this sense, rumor is difficult to define, but the reactions it provokes in its problematizers are recurring: paranoia, seduction, and confusion. Studying rumor in this sense can help us understand how practices of interpretation, such as the "paranoid style," are deployed in specific contexts. As both a *cultural form* and a *problem*, rumor has persisted as a significant, but largely unexamined, presence in the writings and performances of some of the most prominent figures in Egyptian literature, politics, and religion over the last sixty years. To recognize and to theorize this presence is necessary for a more thorough understanding of the making of public culture in modern Egypt beyond the relative autonomy and ontological stability of those forms privileged by contemporary Arab cultural studies and its sister fields, such as the novel, the newspaper, television, film, and so forth.

But rumor is a slippery thing. It is with the actors themselves that I must begin; their voices, and their cultural products, multiple and cacophonous, are the solid ground from which I work. In this dissertation, I follow the Free Officers in the early revolutionary period (1952-1954), as they put rumor on trial; later, I analyze a social scientist electrified by the success of developmentalism's Plan, manifest in the recent construction of the Aswan High Dam (1964). I follow Gamal al-Ghitani (b. 1945), a novelist, journalist, and editor, whose "fictional" texts both record and perform the flow of rumors through the chatter houses of the Akhbar al-Yawm Foundation and the Ministry of Culture. I follow Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi (1928-2010), the former Shaykh of al-Azhar, who, like ʿAmr Adib above, exerted considerable rhetorical efforts to combat rumors of President Mubarak's death, but unlike Adib, has left behind numerous attempts to theorize *al-ishāʿa* in terms adapted from religious and social scientific discourses. I follow Ibrahim ʿIsa (b. 1965), yellow journalist and novelist, who has over the last fifteen years been accused, to borrow ʿAbd al-Wahid's phrase above, of "firing rumors like bullets" in his confrontations with the Mubarak regime. Lastly, I "follow" bloggers, Facebook users, and Youtube artists, whose creative engagements with rumor coincide with some of the major national political events before and during the Revolution of 25 January.

What binds these disparate actors together is rumor, as cultural form produced, or a problem to be confronted, or both. In its most potent manifestations, *al-ishāʿa* feeds off an unresolvable tension in public culture between the relative *destructive* and *affirmative* powers of speech spread broadcast.[4] Rumor destroys reputations, but it also makes them; it undermines the

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[4] I borrow the terms "destructive" and "affirmative" from Linda Hutcheon's study of irony, another noisy form of speech. Hutcheon uses these terms when discussing the much debated ethical edge and "political function" of irony, which some scholars argue is "destructive" (irony is elitist, it cynically cuts down innovation, it divides), and others argue is "affirmative" (irony builds solidarity between individuals and groups, it relieves psychological tension, it resists domination) (1994: 26).

cohesion of the community, but it is also the "social stuff" that brings it together.[5] Does rumor destroy, or create, community, reputations, power, the self? It is sometimes said that rumors "strike" (*taḍrib*) Egyptian society.[6] By this it is meant that rumors are a destructive force, and indeed the bulk of scholarly and non-scholarly writing on rumor in Egypt is decidedly negative. It is a virus that needs to be combatted, along with other social illnesses like illiteracy, religious fundamentalism, or drug culture. However, in Arabic, *ḍaraba*, "to strike," can also mean "to create" or "fashion," as in *ḍaraba mathalan* ("to make an example/proverb"), *ḍaraba khaymatan* ("to pitch/set up a tent"), or *ḍaraba nuqūdan* ("to mint coins"). Taken in this sense, rumors not only "strike" the community – Egypt, "us," or Cairo's chatter houses – but also create and constitute it. These affirmative, creative qualities, I argue, are just as important as rumor's demonic, destructive qualities: together, they constitute an unresolvable ethical and political tension, which I theorize below as "noise." To think of *al-ishāʿa* as noise (or the French *parasite*) means to leave room for the often surprising positive effects produced by a negative social, aesthetic, or political phenomenon. Philosopher Michel Serres has expressed this inexhaustible generativity of *parasite* through a suitable aphorism: "The town makes noise, but the noise makes the town" (1982: 14).

Although this dissertation is limited to public culture in modern Egypt, my understanding

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[5] In *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002), Michael Warner briefly alludes to the possibility that "gossip" and "scandal" might create the sort of "cross-citational field" and form of address that make a public (78-79). Paz argues that rumors and gossip may "contribute to a sense of discursive community" by virtue of their repetition and indexical association with a marginalized social group (2009: 120). Similarly, Neubauer suggests that the Roman *Fama* – a close relative to our "rumor" – "creates and maintains something like a collective consciousness" (1999: 24) for those who pass her on. Most often, however, rumor is characterized as a threat to the community. ʿAbd al-Hamid and Naguib, for example, locate rumor as "the secret behind the continual flow of blood in the Arab Umma" (2009: 13). Speaking in yet more grisly terms, Shaykh ʿAli Mansur Sanad laments, "When we speak of the present reality of the Umma, we find it to be weak and tattered, beset by a gaping wound that exudes fresh blood [*daman ʿabīṭan*] as the result of this weapon thrust into its body" (2009: 16).

[6] See, for example, Nabil ʿUmar, "City of Rumors" ("Madinat al-Shaʾiʿat"), *al-Ahram* (9/5/2007). Discussing the recent rumors of President Mubarak's death, ʿUmar complains that "rumors are striking [*taḍrib*] the clubs, soirees, and gossip sessions of Cairo."

of rumor is developed in dialogue with studies in folklore, cultural history, literature, and anthropology that deal with different cultural and historical contexts. This dialogue is necessary, not only for comparative purposes, but also because of the paucity of works in Arab cultural studies[7] on the subject. This paucity is remarkable, given that rumor has so often been positioned as a significant object of concern by intellectuals and artists not only in Egypt, but in the wider Arab World. The few studies that exist, valuable and insightful though they are, approach rumor obliquely, as an addendum to other conceptual or theoretical concerns.[8] In contrast, I foreground rumor itself as the principle object of investigation, following the traces it leaves across myriad cultural forms in order to find new ways of looking at the intersecting domains of culture and politics. It is indeed my intent to "let rumor take over," as an earlier reviewer of this section commented. By this I mean that this dissertation, while by no means abandoning the strictures of scholarly convention in the humanities, does not, and cannot, resolve its object into a single conceptual framework, teleological narrative (such as that which celebrates the ruptures and rendings performed by the triumphant postmodern on the so regrettable modern), or the necessary epistemological violence committed by the cult of the "argument." There are many conceptual frames, narratives, and arguments to be found here, but rather than tethering myself to one, I tether the writing to rumor, and allow the principle issues, implications, and investigations to accrue to this beast of many tongues as so many flies to sticky paper. This reorientation is experimental, and entails considerable risk: not only is "rumor" a

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[7] Following the scholars assembled in *Arab Cultural Studies* (ed. Sabry, 2012), I understand the field at its most capacious to include communication studies, media studies, anthropology, folklore, social and intellectual history, and literature.

[8] In anthropology, Borneman discusses how rumor mediates the relationship between an anthropologist in Syria and the intelligence agencies (2009: 246-250); Mittermaier has a beautiful short but thick description of a rumor of the *mahdī* and a breast-feeding moon (2011: 31-35); Wynn (2007) investigates rumors in Egypt about SCA head Zahi Hawass and Saudi princes as "social facts." In literature, Bedde (2011) discusses rumor in Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Midaqq Alley*, and Di-Capua (2012) has a brilliant analysis of gossip and the production of knowledge and memory in the archive, as staged in Sunʿ Allah Ibrahim's *Dhat*. In cultural studies, Mai Ghoussoub (2000) analyzes rumors of aphrodisiac chewing gum in Egyptian newspapers.

notoriously difficult thing to capture in its flight across the city; conceptually, too, it is quite recalcitrant, and has been known to drive the analyst mad. Therefore, before elaborating on "noise" and other theoretical concerns, it is necessary to establish a basic understanding of what is meant by the word *al-ishāʿa*.

DEFINING RUMOR

The English word "rumor" and the Arabic *al-ishāʿa* (also: *al-shāʾiʿa*) cover a similar semantic field, and I use the two words interchangeably throughout this dissertation: it behooves the reader to learn at least this one Arabic word now. The specificity of the Arabic word – its etymology and conceptual genealogy – will be dealt with in the next section. To keep things simple, I propose the following broad definition: "rumor" is *a widespread piece of news, the veracity and authorship of which are uncertain*. Of course, we know that things are not so simple: some rumors can turn out to be true, or are thought to be true at a given moment; sometimes the authors is known, or alleged; its precise range may be difficult to determine. They are often strangely fantastical ("The king is drinking the blood of infants!"), but can just as often be mind-numbingly mundane ("The neighbors have adopted a cat!"). Given this conceptual shiftiness, one is not surprised to find it a virtual sine qua non of rumor scholarship that the analyst begin with an expression of angst, bordering on self-doubt, about what exactly he is looking at.[9] It is discourse to be sure, but discourse without any of the conventional anchors of

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[9] About rumor, a cultural studies scholar submits that the "concept's definition is up for grabs" (Harsin 2008: 479, n. 5). Of gossip, an anthropological study says that it is "notoriously difficult to circumscribe in the abstract, and this difficulty is a direct reflection of its inherent ambiguity: what a third party calls 'gossip' is 'information exchange' for those who engage in it" (Besnier 2009: 12-13). Besnier's note is elaborated by Paz's "perspectival" and "processual" definition of rumor: how different groups contend over the labeling of speech, in the process of establishing community and discursive authority (Paz 2009). The sociologist Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa begins his

authorship, audience, structure, or context: these are all unknown, hidden, or a matter of contention. *Qu'est-ce que la rumeur?*

Rumor may first of all be distinguished from other kinds of illicit, subversive, or low speech. Because the differences are a matter of degree, I propose three conceptual axes that situate rumor as more or less similar to other illicit speech forms. They are: the axis of space, the axis of time, and the axis of modality. Along the axis of space, one end represents more private speech forms, while the other end represents more public, or widely-circulating, speech forms. At the first end, we may place "gossip" (*namīma*) and "backbiting" (*ghayba*), which are usually thought of as taking place behind closed doors, or between a limited group of people. "Rumor" (*shāʾiʿa*: literally that which is public or widespread) falls at the opposite end, for it does not recognize spatial constraints: it is said to "fly" through the city streets, into dim alleyways and underneath the bed sheets of the powerful, and on through the watering grounds of journalists and socialites and back again. Along the axis of time, one extreme represents speech forms that have only a brief duration in the social community, while the other extreme represents speech forms of a longer duration. Rumor, typically a fleeting, ephemeral current of discourse, is thus at the one end, while the other end may include any of the various forms of popular tales: the urban legend, the folk tale (roughly, the Arabic *ḥaddūta* or *ḥikāya*), *khurāfa* ("myth" or "superstition"), *mawwāl* (a longer folk ballad). Finally, along the axis of modality, there are at one end more serious – we might say "indicative" – speech forms, while at the other there are more playful –

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book with a definition of "rumor" (*al-shāʾiʿa*); however, the stability of the concept is immediately undermined, when he attributes this definition to those he calls "a number of trustworthy scholars" (1964:7). A footnote next to this phrase, *baʿḍ al-bāḥithīn al-thiqāt*, would seem to promise a reference to particular authors – instead, the footnote contains only a definition of the word *thiqa* ("trustworthy"): *man yuʿtamid ʿalayhi wa yuʾtaman, wa yustaʿmal bi-lafẓ wāḥid li-al-mudhakkar wa al-muʾannath wa al-mufrad wa al-jamʿ, wa qad yujmaʿ fa-yuqāl thiqāt li-al-mudhakkar wa al-muʾannath* ("he who can be depended upon and trusted; used for masculine, feminine, singular and plural; exists also in the plural form *thiqāt* for both masculine and feminine"). In this footnote, the distinction between scientific tract and rumor breaks down. Like rumor, a reference is made to trustworthy authorities, who turn out to be anonymous and untraceable.

we might say "subjunctive" – speech forms. This axis can be used to separate rumors, told in earnest, from jokes (*nukat*, sing. *nukta*), told in jest. Part 3 of this dissertation, in which I discuss the overlap between rumor and humor, is an investigation along this axis of modality. These three axes may be used, as a rule of thumb, to separate the widespread, ephemeral, and earnest "rumor" from other illicit speech forms; they can be shifted and combined to show how one form blends into another. Gossip may escape the privacy of the salon, a widespread story taken seriously by some may be told jokingly by other, and the themes or anxieties encapsulated in a folk tale may give birth to a more contemporary rumor.

However, these external distinctions are not the only ones that matter. There are of course many internal distinctions – many different kinds of "rumor" – that should also be clarified. The most important of these distinctions can be plotted along two axes: the axis of truth, and the axis of agency. First, along the axis of truth, a rumor may be more or less "true" or "false": this is often a matter of perspective, since the person or group damaged by the rumor will be fiercely attempting to deny it, while others persist in framing it as a real "scoop" or scandal. Even a "false" rumor, of course, may contain a certain measure of truth, and for a period of time nearly everyone may behave as if it were true. At the other extreme would be what Edgar Morin has called "rumour pure and absolute" (1971: 17): a story that is purely imagined, with absolutely no event or thing in the contemporary world of experience that could be taken as supporting evidence. Such a rumor may take on fantastical, romantic qualities, like those found in folk tales. Internal differences can also be made along the axis of agency, which is just as contested, perhaps more contested, than the veracity of rumor. At one end of the axis, rumors are more "spontaneous": that is, its sources of authorship are various, and can be located in popular reactions to a significant event, as well as the unconscious, or the narrative intertexts

of a culture. Rumors of Husni Mubarak's death, for example, may have arisen "spontaneously" because of the president's sudden disappearance from state media (an event interpreted collectively), as well as popular anxieties and hopes about a post-Mubarak Egypt. At the other end of this axis, rumors are more "weaponized": that is, they are spread deliberately by hidden agents, as an alternative to more direct or open verbal confrontation.[10] Weaponized rumors can often be confused with slander, but to keep our terms in order, it can be said that "rumors" often target their opponents more obliquely (a rumor is spread about the opponent's hometown, instead of the opponent himself), and their agents are generally hidden, or think themselves hidden. Rumors can be spontaneous, weaponized, or a combination of both: but in each individual case of outbreak, the reasons are difficult to locate. As I will discuss in Part 1 of this dissertation, the favored interpretive practice of state actors in modern Egypt has been to declare rumor – especially when it touches on sensitive political issues – a "plot," an organized campaign of defamation. There are certain psychological and historical reasons for this interpretive practice, but it remains dangerously reductive. The remaining chapters of my dissertation, in Part 2 and Part 3, develop frames for interpreting rumor that move beyond the obsession with "weaponized" forms and "plots."

I have proposed the above axes to help us navigate rumor conceptually, both "externally" as it relates to other speech forms and "internally" as the particular form a rumor takes is the subject of repeated controversy and confusion. These distinctions are not exhaustive; I have decided to highlight those which matter most for the material to be considered in this dissertation. One could still go further: not a few studies of rumor have exhibited tremendous taxonomical flourish. Some have spoken of "white" (optimistic) versus "black" (pessimistic) rumors (ʿIsa 1964: 7-13), and of "grey" and "pink" rumors: the former originate from a source

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[10] Kapferer's has proposed a similar distinction between "spontaneous" and "provoked" rumors (1990: 37).

that is semi-hidden, and the latter emerge from popular hopes and dreams (ʿAbd al-Hamid and Nagib 2009: 27, 28). Others have spoken of "the crawling rumor" (*al-ishāʿa al-zāḥifa aw al-ḥābiya*) – one that spreads slowly and surreptitiously – and of "the diving rumor" (*al-ishāʿa al-ghāṭisa*) – one that breaks out at one time, before "diving" into dormancy, and resurfacing amidst similar circumstances in the future (Ibid.: 23, 25). These latter terms irrepressibly evoke in my mind the "angels" of Quranic Sura 79, referred to as *al-sābiḥāt* ("those who swim along") and *al-sābiqāt* ("those who race"). This is not a fortuitous comparison, for the analyst who spends any great length of time with *ishāʿāt*, attempting to grab at them as they whir past and all around, will inevitably begin to relate to them in a decidedly supernatural manner. Kapferer, for example, talks briefly about the widely shared perception that rumors are endowed with "magical circulatory virtues" (1990: 50). Certain rumors seem to spread with such a velocity, and with such a resistance to authority, that only the existence of some insidious, demonic agency could explain them.[11] Risking too personal a disclosure, I might say that I have at times felt *ishāʿāt* as luminous little sprites, similar in manner and appearance to fireflies. At gloomier moments, I feel them in a manner similar to the "rays" (in Arabic, *al-ashiʿʿa*, from a consonantal root close to that of *al-ishāʿa*) famously described by Dr. Daniel Paul Schreber in his *Memoires of My Nervous Illness* (2000 [1903]). They invade modernity's prized possession of human autonomy of action, setting the individual off course and filling his mind with alien clutter.[12] While such impressions may appear idiosyncratic, they are not quite so. As we will see in the next section, rumor would seem to inhabit a place in the symbolic order quite similar to that of jinn, demons,

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[11] Arlette Farge also uses this language in her study of rumors and the popular press in eighteenth-century France. So often, she observes, the monarchy "could find only supernatural explanations" for the speech of the "dregs of the people" (1994: 25). Similarly, Parisian chroniclers were astonished by the "almost magical way" in which the Jansenists' journal spread (Ibid: 38).

[12] See, for example, pp. 21-31, 47, and 89. Dr. Schreber also spoke of these mind-control "rays" – sent by God, Jehovah, Zoroaster, Thor, or Odin (30) – as a kind of "interference" in the normal workings of the universe; thus they are consonant with my idea of "noise" below.

fairies, and the like, if for no other reason than that they are all in a sense heard but not seen. This can be understood more clearly by way of a tentative genealogy of *al-ishāʿa*.

A GENEALOGY OF *AL-ISHĀʿA*

In proposing a "genealogy" of *al-ishāʿa*, it is not my intention to write the history of a relatively stable "cultural form" that has changed and evolved over time, due to these or those particular factors over the centuries. The claims I make are not those of a historian, and while the texts I assemble here are presented in a linear manner, it is not linear conceptual evolution that concerns me, but the culturally and historically specific resonances that *al-ishāʿa* might evoke in an Arabic (linguistic or cultural) context. That is, my aim is to map the skein of meanings, memories, fantasies, tensions, and narratives that have accrued to *al-ishāʿa* – the word and the idea – in the texts of Arabic literature and history. This genealogy will help situate the writers I analyze in this dissertation, as they come upon this complex object of concern in Egypt's twentieth century. Novelists like Gamal al-Ghitani, and social scientists like Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa – to name only a few writers that I examine in the coming chapters – can be thought of as relatives to this genealogy, not in a strictly deterministic sense, but inasmuch as their texts echo and traffic with those I analyze here. Put another way, premodern writers on rumor like Ibn Iyas and al-Jahiz do not directly inform or influence later Egyptian authors, but link to them complexly in a textual network of possible similarities and differences. Sometimes, the older texts act as a background against which later writers are more or less (un)consciously writing; at other times, the links between them are no more than abstract family resemblances that testify to the perennial, if not universal, problem of *al-ishāʿa* in the pantheon of human concerns.

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Investigations into the cultural significance of "rumor" in European history can confidently begin with classical Greek and Latin literature. This is the point of origin taken by Hans-Joachim Neubauer in his book *The Rumour: A Cultural History* (1999), which I recommend to be read in tandem with the present genealogy of the Arabic *al-ishāʿa*. Neubauer begins with the goddess *Fama*, whose "history is that of a literary motif and at the same time that of an exemplary model" (36). *Fama* appears in Virgil's *Aeneid*, and later Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as a monstrous figuration for both "time-conquering posthumous fame" (63) as well as "rumor" proper (ambiguous news spread widely by the goddess). Modern translations, in fact, often reduce *Fama* to "rumor." Neubauer traces the evolution of this figure into Chaucer, who has the "House of Fame" separated from the House of Rumor, thus splitting the classical double-meaning of *Fama* more properly into two: fame and rumor are distinct. The monstrosity later makes its appearance on stage as Shakespeare's "Rumor," who introduced *Henry IV, Part 2* as well as this dissertation. In contrast, classical Arabic literature does not have *al-ishāʿa* as a literary motif or monstrous figure, and in fact the word itself, in the sense of "rumor," appears relatively late – a lexical innovation that I discuss below. Where exactly, then, can a genealogy of *al-ishāʿa* begin?

If we begin with the Quran, we find only two derivations of the Arabic verbal root *sh-y-ʿ*: the first, *shīʿa* (and plural *shiyaʿ* or *ashyāʿ*), means "group" or "party." The second derivation occurs only once, as the verb *tashīʿ* ("spread") in the phrase *an tashīʿ al-fāḥisha*, "that vice/scandal spread." The Yusuf Ali translation renders the full verse thus: "Those who love (to see) / **Scandal published broadcast [*an tashīʿ al-fāḥisha*]** / Among the Believers, will have / A grievous Penalty in this life / And in the Hereafter: Allah / Knows, and ye know not" (24:19). While the verse does evoke certain elements of the modern noun *ishāʿa* or "rumor," it is not

precisely "a widespread piece of news, the veracity and authorship of which are uncertain" (my definition above). First, the practice described here is not necessarily *talk* about vice (i.e. "Scandal" in Yusuf Ali's translation-interpretation), but the delight taken in seeing vice spread among the Believers.[13] Thus it is more akin to schadenfreude: the infidels are encouraged to see harm befalling their enemies. Second, if the practice so described does include talk, then it would be more akin to gossip, slander, or the specifically "weaponized" form of rumor – that is, talk that has a personal target, and whose authorship is not necessarily contested. Rumor, in contrast, does not necessarily take a personal target (it might be a fantastical story about syringes in Pepsi cans); it does not necessarily demand a "vice" (*fāḥisha*) to consume; and issues of authorship and veracity are almost always at the foreground. In the Quran, the semantic domain covered by the modern *al-ishāʿa* is instead spread out among many different words and phrases dealing with illicit speech, processes of verification, and demonic seduction.

It is for this reason that Islamic religious discourse, when foregrounding "rumor" (*al-ishāʿa*) as an object of concern in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, has run into certain terminological difficulties. *False Rumors, and How Islam has Combatted Them*, a book published in 2001 by the then-Shaykh of al-Azhar Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, provides one example. Tantawi uses the word *ishāʿāt* throughout the book to describe discursive acts that were not so described in the Quran. Most of his examples of "rumors" – accusations leveled by the nonbelievers against various prophets –are closer to what we, following the definitions I set above, would call "slander" or "aspersions." The Quran deploys a rich vocabulary to describe such acts: nouns like *zūr*, *buhtān*, *namīm*, *ifk*, and verbs like *ightāb*, *lamaz*, and *ramā*, all of which are a mix of lying, backbiting, or slander; Tantawi does not distinguish any of these

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[13] Though of course many tafsir's, such as that of Ibn Kathir, have interpreted this verse as implying "talk" (*kalām*) about the vices of others, and sometimes more specifically the gossiping or slander about Aisha (*ḥadīth al-ifk*).

systematically, nor does he reveal how they might differ from *al-ishāʿa*, his preferred term.

Other contemporary religious works similarly draw on proscriptions against "slander" in the

Quran and hadith when writing about "rumor." Many verses from Sura 49 – especially verse 6,

"O ye who believe! / If a wicked person comes / To you with any news, / Ascertain the truth, lest

/ Ye harm people unwittingly" (Yusuf Ali) – are the most commonly deployed, as in Shaykh ʿAli

Mansur Sanad's *Rumor* (*al-Isha'a*, 2009), a pop-sociological book called *Rumors and*

Psychological Warfare (ʿAbd al-Hamid and Naguib, 2009), and virtually any Islamic website

dedicated to the issue.[14]

    None of this is to say that the concept of "rumor" somehow did not exist in early Islam;

rather, the configuration of the problem, the social and political context in which it was

presented, and the words used to describe it, were rather different. In looking for a single

articulation of a faceless, diffuse and ambiguous discursive phenomenon more closely analogous

to today's *al-ishāʿa*, we must look elsewhere. To locate this phenomenon in the beginnings of

Arabic literature, we must look beyond religious texts, beyond speech attributed to human actors,

and into the spritely figures of folk mythology.

    Some of the most renowned *udabāʾ* ("men of letters" or "littérateurs") of the ninth and

tenth centuries – such as al-Jahiz (781-869), al-Masʿudi (896-956), and Abu Faraj al-Isfahani

(897–967) – could point to a mythical figure that dramatizes some of the enigmatic

phenomenology and psychology of "rumor": *al-hātif*. Today in the Arab World, the term has

been revived – against European lexical competitors – by the guardians of linguistic purity to

signify "telephone," but for the epistle-mongers, poets, and chroniclers of centuries past, *al-hātif*

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[14] Among these, Sanad (2009) in particular draws on the rich fund of hadith dedicated to calumny and slander. "He who falsely accuses (*bahata*) a male or female believer, verily God shall blast him into the mud of corruption [*ṭīnat al-khabāl*] until he repents his saying. And I said: What is 'the mud of corruption.' And he said: Pus excreted from the vulvae of prostitutes" (34, 122).

was an invisible spirit, literally a "caller," a sub-species of jinn.[15] The precise nature of this creature, indeed its very existence, is disputed in these early sources. Basically, as al-Masʿudi describes it in his compendious *Prairies of Gold and Gems of Old* (*Muruj al-Dhahab wa Maʿadin al-Jawhar*), *al-hātif* "calls out in an audible voice, from an unseen body" (v. 3: 323), usually to individuals alone out in the wilderness. In different cases, *al-hātif* may offer a vision of the future, send someone on a quest, or transmit news from distant places. In the story of the famously besotted lover Majnun Layla, as transmitted by al-Isfahani, a *hātif* that only Majnun can hear calls out to him the name of his beloved Layla (v. 2: 54). In his epistle "Squaring and Circling" ("al-Tarbiʿ wa al-Tadwir"), al-Jahiz mentions the "poetry" (*ashʿār*) recited by the *hātif*, as well as "the news [*akhbār*] heard at night" (454). Again in his *Book of the Animal* (*Kitab al-Hayawan*), al-Jahiz speaks of the *hātif* among the jinn that "transmit news," sometimes from distant places – as when word apparently reached Basra of the death of the Caliph Mansur in Mecca – or to lucky individuals served specially by a news-mongering spirit (v. 6: 203).

In its uncanny news-transmitting capacity, *al-hātif* presages the ambiguous origins, "magical circulatory virtues," and other elements that characterize the anonymous species of *ishāʿāt* in modern societies. Those who hear these *voix mystérieuses* are never quite certain where they come from, whether they are human or jinn. In the case of Majnun Layla, the protagonist is even unable to ascertain whether those around him can hear what he is hearing. Such is the question posed by the anonymous rumor: Who said so? Who or what is the agent behind the disembodied voice? These are not simple questions; they are questions shot through with panic, self-doubt, and paranoia. Locating the origin of a rumor (or *al-hātif*) is an incredibly vexed process, and is usually without fruit to bear. What it reveals is not the true responsible agent behind the noise (if even there is one), but the rhetorical strategies, interpretive practices,

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[15] See *EI* article.

and deep-seated anxieties of the analyst. While some readers of rumor will be convinced that it is the work of a demonic conspirator, others will have more tolerance for the complexity, and even irresolvability, of the phenomenon. Also like *al-ishāʿa*, the news of *al-hātif* spreads with a "magical" velocity, reaching, for example, Basra from Mecca in an instant despite the absence of modern telecommunications. Thus it is commonly said, in Arabic as well as English, that rumor "spreads like wildfire" (*yantashir intishār al-nār fī al-hashīm*) or "rolls like a snowball" (*tatadaḥraj ka-mathali kurat al-thalj*). It is a "disease," it is "viral," and so on. Or, rumor seems to be the work of angels, demons, "rays," et cetera. These are all on par with *al-hātif* as figurations of the enigmatic, unseen agency or agencies that drive rumor. This common perception that rumor is magical or supernatural derives in part from the very real velocity and range attained by important and ambiguous news; in part, it derives from the paranoia of the analyst or victim of the rumor, who is caught by his inability to grasp the irascible thing either in the concrete or the abstract. It is beyond his control, always controlled by others, and might be lurking around the next corner: there it is, gone, *fort und da*.

In addition, these premodern Arabic writings on *al-hātif* echo what social scientists in the twentieth century would later call the "psychology" or rumor. The question here is "belief" in fantastical stories or phenomena, such as those transmitted by *al-hātif*: news, song, poetry, warnings, and so forth. It is al-Masʿudi, in his *Prairies of Gold*, who offers the furthest speculation on why certain people are "hearing things." It is in particular the nomadic Arabs (*al-ʿarab*) who hear *al-hātif*, due to their habit of "isolation in desolate places and seclusion in valleys, and their treading into treacherous wasteland and inhospitable wilderness" (323). Al-Masʿudi explains that this isolation, during which one is alone with his own thoughts, breeds fear, and this fear breeds "false suspicions and harmful black thoughts" (324). (The "black"

[*sawdāwiyya*] refers to black bile, the melancholic element in the theory of humors; thus it is not accurate to call Masʿudi's approach "psychological"). In this state, the Arab is delusional, and his mind "imagines for him voices and persons and other impossible things" (324). In a likewise manner, investigations into (false or fantastical) rumors in the twentieth century have often sought psychological explanations for why certain groups believe them. Studies such as Allport and Postman's *The Psychology of Rumor* (1947) and Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa's *Rumors, and How We Can Confront Them* (1964) are typical in their reliance on some version of group psychosis as an interpretive framework capable of explaining belief in rumors. When these works – or, more often, derivatives of them – are tapped by more reductive-minded politicians and pundits, psychology becomes pathology, and naïve (or pathological) belief in rumors is used to establish cultural or epistemological hierarchies. Thus al-Masʿudi separates urban intellectuals like himself from the pathologized desert Arab, who sees and hears things that are not really there. Certainly, psychology does play a role in the transmission of rumors (or *al-hātif*), and not a few individuals are willing to believe them. But it is important to remain attentive to the ways in which psychological explanations are used to buttress the power of the analyst (and his social group), to exaggerate cultural boundaries, or even to create boundaries that do not exist.

In the context of this genealogy, the premodern *al-hātif* can be interpreted as a close relative of the ghostly, anonymous, and perhaps pathologically-motivated *al-ishāʿa*. Bristling with fantastical qualities, it represents, like rumor "pure and absolute," one extreme on a conceptual axis. Not all rumors are like *al-hātif*: some are much more mundane, and much less mysterious. Ultimately, while *al-hātif* can serve as a model to understand some renditions of *al-ishāʿa*, the two concepts are not the same, as the former invariably inhabits the supernatural. In the *adab* texts of the ninth and tenth centuries, we are still at quite a distance from the specific

variety of stories, circulations, and epistemologies gathered in the modern noun *al-ishāʿa*.[16]

The verb *ashāʿa* ("to spread" or "to broadcast") needs to answer no progeny test: it is there in the Quran, in early Arabic poetry, in premodern *adab*. But as late as the thirteenth century, when the famed jurist and lexicographer Ibn Manzur (1233-1312) wrote his *Lisan al-ʿArab* (*The Language of the Arabs*), the noun *al-ishāʿa* (and its later variant *al-shāʾiʿa*), have yet to come into their own as "rumor." In this monumental lexicon, Ibn Manzur's entry for the triliteral root *sh-y-ʿ* includes a wealth of derivations, including the Quranic words for "group" or "party" already discussed, words dealing with the urine of camels, and finally the noun *shāʿa* meaning "wide-spread news or information." The word is obsolete, however, and its adjectival derivatives – as in *khabar shāʾiʿ* or "a widespread piece of news" – are not qualified with any of the negative epistemological or cultural values that sully the modern *ishāʿa*. Moreover, Ibn Manzur's entry goes on to explain that a *khabar shāʾiʿ* ("widespread piece of news") is that which has "spread widely among the people, having reached every one of them equally with no individual knowing more of it than another." This is quite distinct from "rumor," which, as *al-hātif*, is usually involved in the politics of cultural and epistemological boundary drawing: *al-ishāʿa* is usually something which "others" believe, such as women, peasants, foreigners, or the gullible. At the very least, the spread of rumor in society today is thought to follow particular paths, usually among the marginal and the subaltern. If Ibn Manzur's definition envisions a social imaginary in which every individual is "equally" informed – that is, the most perfect "public sphere" – *al-ishāʿa* in our time so often reveals a shattered epistemic terrain, with certain groups in-the-know, others strangely gullible, and others in the dark.

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[16] There are many other paths that a genealogy of *al-ishāʿa* might take in the domains of early Arabic literature and culture, and while I have privileged *al-hātif* in my discussion, it is perhaps not the most provocative of the fears and anxieties of the time as regards talk. As Samer Ali has rightly informed me, *al-washy* ("slander" or "divulging") and related concepts feature prominently in classical Arabic literature, as in the story of Majnun Layla, or any number of poems. On these themes in pre- and early Islamic love literature, see Khan (2008).

So in the thirteenth century, the root *sh-y-ʿ* yields concepts of circulation and information, but not necessarily falsity, alterity, or "magic." It is not even yet precisely "talk," since the noun and adjective derivations provided by Ibn Manzur refer to news already in circulation, received passively (although the form-IV verb *ashāʿa* could be used in the active sense of "spreading news"). In the few centuries following Ibn Manzur's lexicon, the word *ishāʿa* meaning "rumor" would, however, eventually come into its own. When this happened, and under what circumstances, are impossible to pinpoint with any accuracy. It is interesting to note, however, that the Syriac root *sh-ʿ-aleph* (metathesis of Arabic *sh-y-ʿ*) produces two words that already contain the meanings taken over by the modern Arabic *ishāʿa*. The first is *shūʿītā*, meaning "talk, discourse, chatter" or "tale, story, fable"; the second is *sheʿyā*, meaning "a game, a play, show, amusement," "trumpery, nonsense," or "jesting, mockery."[17] It is as if the older Arabic sense of "spreading" fused with the Syriac senses of "nonsense" and "discourse" to produce the modern Arabic *al-ishāʿa*: widespread news, the veracity and authorship of which are ambiguous.

While this hypothetical moment of semantic fusion cannot be determined, the earliest Arabic source in which I have been able to locate the word *ishāʿa* is the historiographical work of Ibn Iyas (1448-1522). Ibn Iyas is famous today as one of the fathers of Egyptian historiography, which he pioneered in his multi-volume *Badaʾiʿ al-Zuhur fi Waqaʾiʿ al-Duhur* (*The Marvels of Flowers in the Passing of Hours*), a record of events from the beginning of Creation to the time of composition, climaxing with a detailed account of the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517. The work is a linear but non-teleological series of chronicles, arranged by year and month, and sometimes with day-by-day recountings of major and minor events. Most significantly, the perspective adopted by Ibn Iyas is not that of a court historian, concerned only with news of kings and courtiers; the voices, murmurings, and actions of the broader public

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[17] *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary, Founded Upon the Thesaurus Syriacus of R. Payne Smith* (1999).

resound throughout the text: "[les] rumeurs trouvaient bon accueil dans le texte des *Badâ'i' al-zuhûr,* du fait de la contamination de la chronique par l'*adab*" as Benjamin Lellouch has observed astutely (1995: 127). In other words, Ibn Iyas's "history" was very much a dialogic, polyvocal text, "contaminated" with the noise of the city's center, dregs, peripheries, production, excess, and waste.[18] Here is not only *ishāʿa,* but *ishāʿāt* (pl.): they proliferate in the pages *Badaʾiʿ al-Zuhur*, in particular during times of social and political unrest. The rumors he reports on include both the "spontaneous" and "weaponized" varieties, that is, rumors that have emerged out of popular concerns or speculations, and rumors that are launched as acts of sabotage, respectively. I will give an example of each, and discuss the theoretical issues that they raise.

In the year 791 A.H. (1389 C.E.), a revolt was launched against the reign of Sultan Barquq, the first Egyptian ruler from the "Burji" dynasty of Mamluks, who had recently replaced the "Bahri" dynasty. Amidst the fog of war, conflicting reports were flowing around Cairo about the progress of the battles between Barquq and his Mamluk rivals. Ibn Iyas records a sequence of these reports, each introduced by the phrase *thumma jāʾat al-akhbār* ("Then news came…"); in this way, even though these events happened long before the chronicler himself was born, the strained temporal frame of the time is preserved to a certain dramatic effect. There comes news of riots and routings in Syria. There comes news of victory, of defeat, of uncertainty. For the month of Dhu al-Hijja of that year (November-December 1389 C.E.), Ibn Iyas records news that "Barquq had been defeated and fled, and that Aynas al-Yusufi [another Mamluk] had his head separated from his shoulders" (421). Upon hearing this, the people of Cairo engaged in spontaneous celebrations for three days, adorning their city as if in holiday. However, the chronicler goes on to say, "all this turned out to be fabricated news [*akhbār maṣnūʿa*], devoid of

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[18] Azouqa (2011) seems to think that Ibn Iyas's text is "monophonic" in comparison to his imitator, Gamal al-Ghitani, whose texts are "polyphonic" (4). I do not think such an argument can stand.

any truth, merely false rumors [*ishāʿāt ghayr ṣaḥīḥa*], aimed at placating the soldiers, as was Mintash's intended ruse" (421). Thus Mintash, one of the Mamluk governors who had risen in revolt against Barquq, was revealed to be the source of these reports. He had launched *ishāʿāt* as a weapon of psychological warfare, and he succeeded: the people of Cairo were taken by the story, and the soldiers of Barquq were presumably demoralized that their leader had been routed.

Specifically, rumor is described here as a kind of "ruse" or "trick" (*ḥīla*), a word which has been used in many works of medieval or premodern Arabic *adab* to describe the subversive acts carried out by special classes of beggars, spongers, fools, and thieves.[19] An elaboration on the various "tricks" (*ḥiyal*) as practiced by beggars, for example, is provided by al-Jahiz in his story of Khalid bin Yazid (in *al-Bukhalaʾ*, "The Book of Misers"): they conspire, feign disability, self-mutilate, howl like dogs, and perform "magic" to earn their keep, since society has closed its doors on more respectable options. Although rumor, to my knowledge, was never included among the *ḥiyal* mentioned in works of *adab*,[20] it can be useful to think of it in this way, as a tool of trickery deployed by social actors unable, or unwilling, to engage in more conventional political games. Modern social theory has found different ways of framing these kinds of tricks. Many scholars, such as Michel de Certeau in postmodern theory (1984 [1980]), and Dick Hebdige (2007 [1979]) in the study of subcultures, have redeployed Lévi-Strauss's notion of *bricolage* or "making do": the tactics used by so-called primitive, subaltern, or ordinary people to make their way amidst a society, a natural order, or a technological infrastructure dominated

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[19] For an exceptional study of these tricks and the "underworlds" of medieval Islam, see Bosworth (1976).

[20] The one possible exception is the jackal Dimna, in Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ's eighth-century *Kalīla wa Dimna*, a "mirror for princes" collection of animal fables. Through tricks of the tongue (*bi-ḥīlati dhī al-namīma*, "the gossip's ruse" [39]), Dimna, in "The Story of the Lion and the Bull," manages to convince both the lion and the bull that the one is plotting against the other, and thus sets the scene for the elimination of his rival. However, *namīma* ("gossip") or ("backbiting") is not the same as *ishāʿa* ("rumor"), and the act here is not deception through channels of mass communication, but through small, private, backroom conspiracy. A modern revision of Dimna's story does celebrate his act as "a rumor" (*shāʾiʿa*) (al-ʿIryan and Qandil 1971: 52), but the act is still the same.

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by others. Certeau, in fact, compares these "microbe-like operations" (xiv) to the medieval Arabic *ḥiyal*. In addition, Ranajit Guha (1983) and James Scott (1990) have discussed tactics like industrial sabotage, jokes, gossip, and rumor as among the "tools of peasant insurgency" and the "weapons of the weak," respectively. At issue here is what we count as "political," and how we can think of agency, resistance, and subversion beyond the narrow limits posed by self-defeating theories of hegemony. These tactics, *ḥiyal*, or acts of *bricolage* let us recognize that any system of domination or hegemony is not perfect, and that despite the apparent supremacy of elites in the realm of political action, there remains a multiplicity of methods open to the "dominated" and the "disenfranchised."

However, in Ibn Iyas, as well as in twentieth-century Egypt, *al-ishāʿa* is not just, as Scott would have it, a "weapon of the weak" – it is also a weapon of the powerful, the privileged, and the politically "dominant." It might be the weapon of any range of actors, with varying degrees of "power" and "domination," however we choose to define such terms. In the case of Mintash, rumor is the weapon of a Mamluk governor, one in revolt to be sure, but who is by no means weak or subaltern.[21] At many points in this dissertation, I will discuss what I call the "weaponized" variety of rumors, but rather than assume that its agents are marginal and disenfranchised (and therefore, in a sense, to be sympathized with), I focus instead on the kind of effects it may or may not produce, and what it reveals about the motives, anxieties, aspirations, and prejudices of the rumormongers in question. A famous author like Gamal al-Ghitani, for example, may use rumor to subvert the authority of a relative equal whom he secretly admires, or detests, for reasons that would not otherwise be gleaned from his public interviews and

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[21] I have often thought that it might be easier to call the surreptitious lies of the powerful "propaganda," and the lies of the powerless "rumor," but it is not at all clear to me that the two are any different. What difference there is lies in the wealth of other means available to each group: state actors, for example, will have the entire machinery of state media, intelligence agencies, and finances to spread disinformation, while ordinary citizens may only have the power of the spoken word.

newspaper articles. Rumor may still be used by marginalized actors, such as bloggers, but it is not used by them only.

In addition to weaponized rumor, Ibn Iyas also gives many examples of the spontaneous variety. On the 24th of Shawwal, 792 A.H. (October 4th, 1390 C.E.) – a Friday – we are told that "Cairo and its extremities shook." Sermons were cut-off in mid-sentence; the prayers of worshipers were spoiled; and shops were closed as commercial areas of the city went into a virtual lock-down. This, we are told, was the result of a rumor: "The Princes and the Mamelukes have mounted their horses!" Things had still not settled down since the revolt against Barquq. Upon hearing this, the citizens of Cairo condensed into a crowd, and it was everyman for himself. People dropped money and handkerchiefs in the commotion, rushing to get home. And yet, when the dust settled, "the rumor [*al-ishāʿa*] turned out to be false." How had it all begun? The chronicler reports that the rumor, rather than the conscious conceit of a hidden agent like Mintash, arose out of a popular misinterpretation of events. We are told that, near the Citadel, two Mamluks had gotten into a quarrel, during which their donkey was set loose and plunged headlong into a stable full of horses. Startled, the horses stampeded through the streets, and this strange sight is what witnesses mistook as the mobilization of the Mamluk cavalry. Thus *al-ishāʿa* in this case is not a weapon, deliberately launched, but a rather infelicitous act of popular interpretation. It is of the same manner as many of the rumors studied by Farge and Revel in eighteenth-century Paris; as in their cases, "the beginning was always the same: a street scene interpreted instantaneously and collectively" (1990: 11). A police officer harasses a youth on the corner, and word spreads that the authorities are kidnapping children and sending them to slave colonies. Or, a stable of horses breaks into stampede, and immediately it is said around the city that war has broken out again.

However, it is not sufficient simply to point to the falsity of this rumor, to explain it as just a silly "misinterpretation." For it was a very specific misinterpretation, the poetics of which – the poetics of *al-ishāʿa* – are to be located, as Farge and Revel argue, in the anxieties and aspirations of the community, the whole "hotchpotch of culture" (1990: 112), the social and political context in which the rumor could gain credibility. Egypt had been in a state of war since the beginning of the revolt against Barquq, and the likelihood of a cavalry assault on Cairo was not at all improbable. Add to this the fact that in the fourteenth century, the country had been ravaged by the Black Death, and the population cut in half. The city's nervous system was in shock, and it would only take the smallest sign of irregularity to force it into a collective spasm. Thus by looking at rumor, we are able to detect, at least in a general sense, the attitudes and anxieties which prevailed among the general population of Cairo at this time, and which would have remained obscured had Ibn Iyas not opened his ears to the happenings outside the walls of the Citadel. As Lellouch has argued in his study of the chronicler's account of the Ottoman conquest of 1517, rumors like this were included not simply as trivial amusements, but in order to provide something like a thick description of "l'état d'esprit qui régnait au Souk" (1995: 129).

In *Badaʾiʿ al-Zuhur*, then, the reader encounters *al-ishāʿa* as a spontaneous expression of popular anxieties, and as a weapon of war. Thus rumor has come into its own as a *cultural form*, a complex human artifact used and abused, and identified in a single word. In addition, Ibn Iyas's text records how rumor has become a *problem*, confronted by both the state and intellectuals. We can see this if we continue with the full account of the "cavalry" rumor just analyzed. After the day's events, the Wali of Cairo arrested "a group of the uncouth masses, singling them out for the crime of "speaking of that which is not his business" (*yatakallam fīmā*

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lā yaʿnīh). They were beaten publicly, and the people of Cairo were given a stern warning: "he who does not mind his own business will be flogged, and struck with nails" (*man taḥaddatha fīmā lā yaʿnīhi ḍuriba bil-maqāriʿ wa summira*). This was certainly not the first time in history that subversive speech was corporally punished. For us, its significance lies in its demonstration of some of the perennial tropes and tensions in rumor combat. The first line of attack on this *ishāʿa* is launched by the state: the spectacular punishment of a select group. In one sense, this is a rhetorical strategy: the diffuse problem of rumor is reduced to the actions of a small group, and their bodies are used as an example to warn other would-be talkers. In another sense, this punishment is an act of discursive and epistemological hierarchization, whereby the Wali of Cairo is able to assert his supremacy. The Wali has the authority to cast subversive speech as "rumor," the talk of the city dregs (*ardhāl al-ʿāmma*); his words, by contrast, are truth itself.

The second confrontation with rumor as a *problem* is performed by Ibn Iyas himself in the text. Rumors are uncanny stretches of discourse, offering no explanations themselves on their progeny, purpose, or trajectory. In this case *al-ishāʿa* is said to have "flown" (*ṭārat*) all throughout Cairo, from center to periphery and back again; but its exact cause remains as a question, a problem for the analyst to solve. The chronicler offers his explanation as fact: two Mamluks quarreled, their donkey was set loose, and the horses were frightened into a stampede through the streets. It is a peculiar explanation. The kind of comical butterfly effect it describes (dispute→loose donkey→stampede of horses→rumor→stampede of people) is a common trope in folk etiologies, and features elsewhere in *Badaʾiʿ al-Zuhur*. In the previous year (791A.H.), for example, a legendary feud between two villages is described and traced back to a drop of honey, which attracted a wasp, which attracted a cat, which attracted a dog, and an issuing fight

in the market (421).[22] There are of course other ways in which the rumor could have been interpreted. A focus on mass psychology, rather than the causal chain leading to the horses; the detection of a plot or hidden agent behind the scenes, responsible for launching the rumor as a weapon; the concordance of various popular narratives and expectations about cavalries: these are just some of the possible alternative interpretations. But Ibn Iyas has resorted to the interpretive practice closest at hand, which I have called the butterfly effect, or comical folk etiology. To study the confrontation with rumor, then, can reveal several things. It reveals, in the case of Ibn Iyas, a particular interpretive disposition that is not specific to rumor, but is practiced more generally and applied to other phenomenon, such as the village feud. Ibn Iyas has a general disposition to deploy folk etiologies; other analysts may tend towards a paranoid style of interpretation, which rests on the figure of the conspirator. In addition, the confrontation with rumor reveals a particular way in which an individual or group, such as the Wali of Cairo, attempts to reassert his discursive authority in a time of social crisis.

Badaʾiʿ al-Zuhur represents a significant development in the genealogy of *al-ishāʿa*. It is, first of all, one of the first Arabic texts where the *word* appears in its modern sense of widespread, anonymous, uncertain news. It is unlikely that the lexical innovation occurred during Ibn Iyas's time. The events I have analyzed in his chronicles occur in the late fourteenth century; if Ibn Manzur's lexicon earlier in the thirteenth century did not include the word in the sense familiar to Ibn Iyas, then perhaps it is in this period that it began gaining currency. More important than the word itself is the range of concerns exhibited in the text. Rumor is an enigmatic text, a spontaneous eruption and a weapon, and a problem to be combatted and interpreted. Rumor is here, in *Badaʾiʿ al-Zuhur*, for the same reasons it appeared in *Henry IV,*

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[22] A folk etiology, remarkably similar to the one Ibn Iyas gives for the rumor, was used to explain the Great Chicago Fire of 1871: a distracted Irish woman→a perturbed cow→knocked-over lantern→loose hay→a metropolis in flames.

Part 2: social and political turmoil, war, and rebellion. In fact, the noisy rebellion against Barquq in 1389 C.E. very neatly coincides with the rumor-mediated troubles of the historical Henry IV, who managed to thwart an insurrection at the Battle of Shrewsbury in 1403 C.E., the occasion for Rumor's entrance in Shakespeare's play. Another reason for the appearance of *ishāʿāt* in *Badaʾiʿ al-Zuhur* must also be the perspective of the chronicler himself, whose ears and eyes were open to the wider acoustic economy of the city. There is a concern for public opinion of a kind, the vicissitudes of mass communications, and the noise that might shake and fracture an entire city. These are very modern concerns, and it is from here that *al-ishāʿa* makes its entrance in Arabic history and literature.

From here, a study of rumor in Egyptian public culture could turn to any number of cultural forms at many different periods. The genre of historiography pioneered by Ibn Iyas would be adopted by countless others from his time through the nineteenth century. Al-Jabarti (1753-1825), for example, followed the earlier chronicler's penchant for recording popular rumors in his *ʿAjaʾib al-ʾAthar fi al-Tarajim wa al-Akhbar* or *History of Egypt*. One might also wish to consider further *nahḍa*-era writers, journalists, and social reformers like ʿAbd Allah al-Nadim (1845-1896), for whom the *khurāfāt* or "superstitions" of the lower classes, and the *ishāʿāt* spread among newspaper readers in cafes, became an object of concern. At the turn of the century, as Timothy Mitchell has noted, "noise and confusion" became a common civilizational anxiety for writers like Muhammad ʿUmar (d. 1918 or 1919) when bemoaning the backwardness of Egyptian society (1988: 117-119). A study of rumor might also consider in greater depth the cartoon character Ishaʿa Hanim ("Dame Rumor") drawn by the caricaturist Alexander Sarukhan in the early 1940s. Ishaʿa Hanim, who disappeared at the end of the Second World War, was a significant "embodiment" of rumor in an Arabic context that resonates vaguely

with the distant *al-hātif*. "She" also was a female, and a foreigner, and thus performed a common stereotype of illicit speech as "other" in terms of gender and ethnicity. There are many other branches that one may include in a genealogy of *al-ishāʿa*.

However, I have chosen to focus in this dissertation on different sites and scenes in Egyptian public culture beginning with July 23, 1952. There are two principle reasons for this focus. The first is that this date marks the beginning of military rule in Egypt. While *ishāʿāt* certainly existed as a weapon and as an object of intellectual concern prior to this date, the new regime can be said to be responsible for a new profusion of writings on, investigations into, and uses of the phenomenon in Egyptian public culture. This would be evident in the new national political language crafted by the Free Officers, who in the early years of the revolution, and subsequently, spoke often of the threat of *ishāʿāt* to their "blessed movement," and identified them among the many plots and conspiracies hatched by colonialist and feudalist interests. In December, 1953, Anwar Sadat published a lengthy article on what he called a "new weapon" (*silāḥ gadīd*): "rumors" spread by traitors and conspirators.[23] Earlier that year, among the many show trials staged at the Revolutionary Tribunal, the public prosecutor brought before the judges what he called "a new kind of accusation and a new type of accused" (*lawnan gadīdan min al-ittihām wa nawʿan gadīdan min al-muttahamīn*): three individuals charged with "spreading rumors" (Kayra 1953: 354). If rumor was not "new," it was certainly being presented that way, as a threat that ordinary people might not quite understand, or grasp the danger it presented. The word *al-ishāʿa* still meant the same thing as when it was used by Ibn Iyas, but in addition, it was now becoming a kind of homogenizing metaphor for all manner of subversive speech, anything the regime did not want to hear and could not quite control. The irony, or the hypocrisy, of this new problem was that the Free Officers were in many ways responsible. They themselves spread

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[23] *Al-Gumhuriyya*, 12/7/1953.

rumors, lies, and fabrications of all sorts.[24] But even more important was the culture of secrecy that the army had brought with them from the barracks to the organs of state and society. The level of secrecy imposed on the workings of the state, its actors and archives and agencies, has not remained the same from 1952 through the present; however, it has, with varying degrees of severity, remained a constant feature of authoritarian regimes in Egypt since then. This has left many events of the past and present accessible to the majority of citizens only through speculation, gossip, and rumor; *al-ishāʿa*, in different forms, has as a result become a continual presence in Egyptian public culture.

The second reason for my focus on the period beginning in 1952 is the flourishing of social scientific interest in rumor around this time. It is here, in the middle of the twentieth century, that the Arabic *al-ishāʿa* intersects most closely with the English "rumor" in conceptual and scientific terms. While it was not the first work of its kind, Gordon Allport and Leo Postman's *The Psychology of Rumor* (1947) proved to be seminal, serving as a touchstone for later sociological and social-psychological approaches to the topic. Allport's interest in rumors had begun at least in 1942 when, in coordination with the United States government, he established what were called "rumor clinics": diagnoses, explanations, and denials printed in national newspapers against widely circulating stories deemed false. As Neubauer has argued, Allport and Postman's 1947 book, and a number of other social scientific works on the topic, were very much the product of the clinics and parallel campaigns in the military. That is, the inception of rumor scholarship arose out of a desire for combat and control; the knowledge produced on the subject cannot be considered independently of this fact. The first book-length

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[24] The regime's complicity in such activities is common knowledge. It was also revealed by Salah Nasr, in a book published in 1973. Nasr, the head of Egypt's General Intelligence Agency until his scandalous fall in the "Case of the Dereliction of the Intelligence Services" (*qaḍiyya inḥirāf al-mukhābarāt*) in 1968, refers casually to "scientific methods for spreading rumors" (*ṭuruq ʿilmiyya li-nashr al-shāʾiʿāt*) as part of the training received by intelligence officers (1975: 122).

study of *ishāʿāt* (or rather *shāʾiʿāt,* a newer synonym) was published in Egypt in 1964, and was motivated by this same desire: it was entitled *Rumors, and How We Can Confront Them* (ʿIsa 1964). The appearance of such a book in Arabic, and its successors (cf. Tantawi 2001), thus needs to be considered in a global context of "anti-rumor" campaigns lead by governments and social scientists around the world. At the same time, however, this book was responding to a problem conceived locally as a threat to a regime's plans for development and discursive hegemony. Its purpose, along with related scholarship, polemics, and prosecutions, was to achieve total control over nature and society. Its effects, perhaps, amounted to no more, and no less, than the manufacturing of an increasingly strident association between "Egyptians" or "Egyptian society" on the one hand, and "rumors," gossip, and idle talk on the other. Rumor would certainly exist without works by ʿIsa and Tantawi. However, its positioning as a problem, and the view that it was in a sense peculiar to Egypt (and in particular the noisy "masses"), could not have been achieved without this violent discursive work.

It is at this confluence of state secrecy, authoritarianism, and social scientific interest, that we notice a new attention given to *al-ishāʿa* in the years and decades following July, 1952. This does not entirely explain why ʿAmr Adib, in the quotation above, said that "Egypt is a country of rumors," but it helps us begin to understand the broader historical, social, and political context in which he was speaking. Of course *al-ishāʿa* would not remain the "same" problem, or remain equally on the minds of all users and consumers of mass media for sixty years: in each of the chapters of this dissertation, a slightly different meaning, use, or problematization of rumor will emerge, and this can only be clarified in context. Nonetheless, when *al-ishāʿa* does appear, the tension it provokes in a community of speakers is of a recurring, and probably unresolvable, nature. This tension derives from the power, real or perceived, of widespread, false or fantastical

speech. If the bulk of government, religious, and social scientific writing on *al-ishāʿa* has warned repeatedly that this power is negative and destructive, a closer and more careful look at the phenomenon as it is used and abused in different contexts will help reveal its ethical and political ambiguity. I will attempt to theorize this ambiguity as what I call "noise."

THEORIZING NOISE

The Latin word "rumor" signified "noise," and while in English the two terms are not synonymous, I use the latter in order to think about the ethical and political ambivalence of the former (*al-ishāʿa*). "Noise" has a relatively recent provenance in Western social theory, and it is perhaps no surprise that, roughly at the same time that social psychologists like Allport and Postman were agonizing over rumor, scholars in information theory were coming to a similar problem of their own. The mathematician Claude Shannon, the founder of information theory, was probably the first to use "noise" in a technical sense; J.R. Pierce was responsible for popularizing the term, which he defined thus: "Any undesired disturbance in a signaling system, such as, random electric currents in a telephone system. Noise is observed as static or hissing in radio receivers and as 'snow' in TV" (1961: 291). From this early definition, limited to the materiality of communication infrastructures, noise has since been taken by scholars in different areas of the humanities and social sciences as a metaphor for disturbances in semiotic, social, or political systems. It is often contrasted to the legible "messages," "sounds," "signals," or "sense" of more dominant or mainstream actors: noise is nonsense, confusion, and chaos; it is not necessarily a message of its own, but serves rather to interrupt or *interfere* with the workings of a message system, ideology, or technological infrastructure already in place.

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Dick Hebdige, for example, has theorized "noise" as "the challenge to the symbolic order" posed by subcultural styles like punk, rap, Rastafarianism, and so forth (2007: 133). To dominant social classes, these noisy styles function "not only as a metaphor for potential anarchy 'out there' but as an actual mechanism of semantic disorder: a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation" (90). In this sense, noise is thought of as a mode of resistance. It may not be entirely conscious, but it forces the dull and complacent members of the bourgeoisie to stop work as normal and, the hope is, recognize the contingency of their own style. At its best, noise of this kind throws a symbolic shoe into the regular workings of mass media and consumerism, and forces it to reorganize to accommodate or even celebrate the noise makers. At its worst, a noisy style will provoke a clampdown by authorities; however, even in this case, the clampdown often leads to an exacerbation (or flourishing) of the noise, and a weakening the anti-noise authorities. In another context, Brian Larkin has opposed "signals" – "media and modes of rule" – to "noise" – "the unstable consequences media bring about" (2008: 10). Noise can refer to the "interference produced by religious and cultural values, the historic configurations in which technologies and cultural forms are made manifest" (Ibid.). Popular superstitions, for example, may present a kind of noise or interference to the construction of a movie theater or railroad, as they cause people to fear the unknown functions of these technologies and thus avoid or sabotage them. Or, an educational film may encounter the "noise" of an audience whose familiar frames of reference and stock of cultural forms prevent them from "receiving the message" as intended.

Rumor might constitute noise in any of these interrelated senses of interference and instability. In an authoritarian context, the patriarch's attempts to communicate with the masses may be frustrated by popular rumors of his corruption, illegitimacy, or false intentions. Rumors

might distract people's minds with exaggerations and trivial details, and keep them from following the patriarch's frequent speeches and calls to attention. Rumors may even confuse the patriarch himself, as he receives a barrage of conflicting reports and speculations from his network of advisors and intelligence officers. Of course, these concerns are not unique to an authoritarian context. Even in more democratic societies, rumors are "noise" to the rational, deliberative proceedings of the public sphere. If *al-ishāʿa* delivers false or frivolous information, it is feared that ordinary citizens will be unable to make informed decisions, come to reasonable solutions, or realize their true interests. As such, the noise of rumors represents a kind of false consciousness, whose victims are driven to self-defeating actions. The noise may be innocuous too, but in large doses and in high frequencies, it would seem to be nothing but chaos, negativity, and disorder whatever the order may be, democratic or authoritarian.

Noise is essentially a negative, *destructive* force; however, as Hebdige has argued, noise can also deliver positive, or what I will call *affirmative*, outcomes. This ambivalence surrounding noise, and in particular the unexpected affirmative function of a destructive force, is central to Michel Serres's philosophy of *parasite* (French for "parasite" and "noise"): an intractable but potentially beneficial nuisance to systems whether human, animal, technological, or all three. *Parasite*, according to Serres, is more than interference, it is a figure for he who "has the last word, who produces disorder and generates a different order" (1982: 15). The question which noise constantly poses is: "are we in the pathology of systems or in their emergence and evolution?" (14). That is, does the parasite destroy the host, or does it make him stronger and more in harmony with his environment? Serres admits that he doesn't know, but with a quixotic French optimism, he prefers to think it is the latter.

Serres's project is a philosophical one, concerned less with the noise on the street than the

noise of the gradual evolution of the order of things. Its ethical and political ambivalence –

accented with an irrepressible optimism – can, nonetheless, be useful when thinking about the

relative destructive and affirmative potentials of rumor. Certainly *al-ishāʿa* destroys: it destroys

truth, reputations, unity, coherence. But it also affirms. An argument which may be articulated

in these terms was made by Georges Lefebvre in what is probably the most famous social history

written of a rumor. In his book *The Great Fear of 1789* (1973 [1932]), Lefebvre intricately

traces the social, political, and economic currents which lead to the eruption of a panic (*La

Grande Peur*) in revolutionary France. The panic was most immediately the result of rumors

about impending attacks by "brigands" on farms, villages, and towns across the country. The

rumors were false: they lead to chaos, to riots, to the burning of chateaus, to some deaths. Thus

they were destructive. However, Lefebvre argues that these rumors were significant more for the

unexpected *positive* results they produced. The fear "almost always suspended or diminished

municipal disagreements instead of causing them" (203); it "tightened the bonds of solidarity

which linked the town and countryside as well as the towns themselves" (Ibid.); and it lead the

members of the Third Estate to reach "a deeper realization of their own strength and power"

(204). The revolution was not destroyed by these rumors, it was emboldened by them, as

significant numbers organized themselves in arms against the phantom brigands.

Rumor, as noise, is involved in the irony of outcomes. In the moment of their outbreak,

of course, it is impossible to determine their relative destructive or affirmative powers. At the

very least, as Serres suggests, the attempt to violently eradicate the problem will prove worse

than any destruction wrought by the noise itself: the parasitic infestation will spread, and the host

will be killed. Like Serres, I do not know in advance if *ishāʿāt* are pathological or productive,

but I would like to remain open to the latter. In the chapters of this dissertation, I pose the

question of rumor's ethics and politics repeatedly, in different contexts. I cannot assume that the parasite is an essentially destructive or affirmative force. I aim for a suspension of the evaluative urge, which so often forecloses investigation into the complexity of things like rumor, and forces us to miss a full appreciation of the noise of the world.

DIVISION OF CHAPTERS

My dissertation is divided into three Parts, each of which investigates a different field of public culture in modern Egypt. I have chosen these three fields – the rhetoric and performances of state actors; the literature of Gamal al-Ghitani; and cyberspace – not because I believe they are especially prone to fantasy, distortion, and rumor, but because, for different reasons, they often appear to be, or have been framed as, places especially rich in the arts and politics of *al-ishāʿa*. I have used the term "public culture" to encompass all these fields, because they are not totally separate, whether in time or in space.[25] Many of the politicians and events covered in Part 1, such as Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat, and Husni Mubarak, reappear in caricature in Part 2 when I read literature by Gamal al-Ghitani. Conversely, I also use the literary texts of al-Ghitani in Part 1 for purposes of contextualization and historical documentation. Also, while Part 3 investigates performances in "cyberspace," the events and personalities I cover overlap with many of those discussed in a different field in Part 1 and Part 2. While in this dissertation I analyze some of the most well-known figures in Egyptian politics, literature, and history, the

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[25] "Public culture" was a term proposed by Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge in the inaugural issue of the journal *Public Culture* (1988). This is theorized not as a definite social space or set of practices, but as a capacious, cacophonous arena in which the unhelpful dichotomies of "high versus low culture; mass versus elite culture; and popular or folk versus classical culture" – as well as "national" versus "international" or "transnational" culture – are dispensed with, or shown to be constantly contested and refigured by the actors, technologies, and cultural forms that interact in public life. See Appadurai and Breckenridge, "Why Public Culture?" (1988).

texts, performances and events I encounter belong overwhelmingly to an uncharted domain in the lives and works of these actors with, in, and against rumor.

Part 1 of my dissertation investigates the emergence and re-emergence of *ishāʿāt* as a problem for the projects and personalities of the Egyptian state since 1952, and is divided into three chapters. While the practices that may be grouped under the label "combatting rumors" are no less numerous and complex that the object itself (rumor), I focus only on the historical moments when this combat between the state and its demons has been noisiest. This is a study of rhetoric, social drama, and interpretive styles. Chapter 1, "Revolution against Rumors," locates the emergence of rumor as an object of state discipline in the context of the July Revolution of 1952. Through a reading of texts by Muhammad Naguib and Anwar Sadat during the period 1952-1954, I analyze the rhetorical and dramatic strategies deployed by the Free Officers against rumors, assessing their relative success, and explaining their frequent failure. In Chapter 2, "Paranoia and the Plan," I analyze what is most likely the first book-length study of rumor in modern Egypt: Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa's *Rumors, and How We Can Confront Them*, published in 1964. In my reading of the book, I investigate the historical and psychological underpinnings of the "paranoid style" of interpretation commonly deployed against rumor. The repeated detection of a plot or conspiracy behind *ishāʿāt*, I argue, can be understood in part as the analyst's psychological projection of his ideal notion of agency onto the enemy. Finally, Chapter 3, "All the President's Parasites," examines how regime representatives responded to rumors about the death of President Mubarak in 2007. I analyze the rhetorical and interpretive practices deployed against the rumors, as well as the anxieties that motivate them, in order to compare and contrast this "rumor combat" with that of earlier decades. In these chapters, I analyze rumor as a *problem*, and the reactions to it, mostly avoiding analysis of rumors themselves as *cultural forms*

– unless for the purposes of contextualization – which is the focus of my analysis in Parts 2 and 3.

In the chapters of Part 2, I perform close readings of two novels by Gamal al-Ghitani: *Tales of the Foundation* (1997) and *Tales of the Treasure Trove* (2002). In many of his novels, and especially these two, al-Ghitani has the same acute kind of aesthetic and political sensitivity to rumors as the chronicler Ibn Iyas. The novelist's view, however, is of the present, and in particular the noisy domain of cultural politics in Egypt's mid-to-late twentieth century. By turning to literature in these chapters, I am able to register the complexity of rumor as a cultural form, both spontaneous and weaponized, and assess its ethics and politics. Chapter 4 focuses on a character in the novels called ʿAtiyya Beh, also known as "the Rumormonger." I take this character as a locus for analyzing what I call the "rhetoric of the rumormonger" – the strategies he employees to spread fantastical tales. I will then turn to an analysis of the rumors themselves, unraveling the narrative and psychological threads that constitute their *poésie fabuleuse*. In Chapter 5, I investigate rumors in relation to the cultural of secrecy, dubbed "the Age of Occultation," that consumes the life of the novels' characters. Employees in the fictional Foundation, I suggest, are "seduced" by those who are at once looming over them and obscured by secrecy. For many employees, rumor operates here as the pleasurable uncovering of secrets about these seductive objects and figures. By such means, too, they seek to extend their control over those who control them. These rumors also express pervasive fantasies and fears, shot through with a not unreasonable amount of "facts." Finally, in Chapter 6, I place these two novels in their specific social and historical context to reveal how they operate as the author's own performance of rumormongering. Many of the employees of the "Foundation" are thinly-veiled caricatures of the major players in Egyptian cultural politics that al-Ghitani has rubbed up

against in the Akhbar al-Yawm Foundation (the media conglomerate that owns *Akhbar al-Adab*, the literary journal he launched and edited for nearly twenty years) and the Ministry of Culture. Thus the "Founder," for example, stands in for the legendary newspaper tycoon Mustafa Amin, just as "Fayruz Bahari" stands in for Faruq Husni, the former Egyptian Minister of Culture. I propose three overlapping readings of the novels as rumormongering.

In Part 3, I investigate some of the productive intersections between rumor and humor in Egyptian cyberspace. In much of history, in social scientific scholarship, and in the preceding two Parts, *al-ishāʿa* has been inflected with grave undertones, and kept carefully insulated from the conceptual echo of laughter. There are good reasons for this. Rumor is destructive, as one cannot tire of pointing out, and the damage it inflicts on its victims is anything but pleasant. Rumor also would appear to belong to the dogmatic, those who stubbornly refuse to step back and enlighten their superstitious beliefs with a little irony. The terrain of rumor is bleak, as are all those who catch it in the ear. And yet, it is important, I argue, to complicate this picture considerably. Keeping an ear open for the peal of laughter that infuses rumormongering will reveal that it is a practice often taken up in jest. The rumormonger is not naïve, nor is he single-minded; he may be ambivalent, uncertain, optimistic, pessimistic, technical, or artistic; he may be all of these at once. Moreover, a careful consideration of humor allows space for noticing the affirmative functions of rumor, rather than its much bemoaned allegiance to evil. Rumor can destroy, it does destroy, but it also generates possibility, explores alternatives to the status quo, and serves as a catalyst for innovative cultural and political forms.

My analysis here centers on performances in the "playground" of the Egyptian blogosphere and its environs, and I make a number of claims for the affirmative, subversive, or transformative functions of these performances. In Chapter 7, I followed the many iterations and

operations of the blogging campaign "*Mubārak Māt*," elaborating on theories of "play" to accurately describe the attitude of the performers, their sense of space, and the transformative potential of their work. For these artists, play is not belief or dangerous fantasy, it is an experimentation with fictions grounded in the real. It is also a self-reflexive mode, as the artists adopt at different moments varying evaluative stances towards themselves, their musical and cultural intertexts, the rumors, and President Mubarak. I insist on the tangible aesthetic and political consequences of *Mubārak Māt*, arguing that it actualizes the fiction it performs, as it releases the artists and their audience from the most significant signs of Mubarak's presence. While rumor destroys one reality, it also creates another, and it is this positive, generative aspect that needs to be acknowledged. In Chapter 8, by contrast, I readmit the destructive potential of rumor, but investigate an alternative means of confronting it through parody. Rumors about the revolutionary activist Wael Ghonim present a threat to his sympathizers, but they respond in a creative fashion. Parody, as performed by the graphic artist Ashraf Hamdi, includes both negative critique and positive play. Thus while it remains committed to a progressive politics, it also blissfully incorporates the paranoid style of rumor into its own work.

In closing, I would like to offer a final note on the organization of the dissertation. While the three Parts are interconnected, and most amenable to a straightforward, linear reading, there remain more promiscuous links, resonances, trap doors, and slippages that connect each to the others. For *al-ishāʿa* is not just my *object* of investigation, it is also the investigation itself. Rumor can be a guide for an alternative mode of reading, one that takes seriously the hypertextual and the rhizomatic, and the paranoid, to spread across the otherwise hermetically-sealed boundaries of individual cultural forms, divided from each other both as individual texts and in disciplinary terms as "literature," "sociology," "religion" and so forth. In this dissertation,

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I treat these divisions as largely artificial, as impediments to following the fluidity and metamorphoses of the objects of concern. Thus not only do literary texts by Gamal al-Ghitani "interfere" to clarify issues I raise in a reading of newspapers and government communiques, but so do many of the figures introduced in my "genealogy" of *al-ishāʿa*, in particular al-Jahiz, break out into my analyses of more contemporary texts. These rumor-like loops and connections are important in order to break out of any excessively cramped notions of cultural and historical specificity that may attempt to assert themselves. They are also important to resist the closure of signs, and to leave space open for other readings of rumor.

PART 1

CHASING THE PARASITE: STRATEGIES AND STYLES OF "COMBATTING RUMORS" IN POSTCOLONIAL EGYPT

> The strategies of intervention, the interruption of the process or of the thing, observation that seeks to clarify… all make complexity increase, the price of which increases astronomically. A new obscurity accumulates in unexpected locations, spots that had tended toward clarity; we want to dislodge it but can only do so at ever-increasing prices and at the price of a new obscurity, blacker yet, with a deeper, darker shadow. Chase the parasite – he comes galloping back, accompanied, just like the demons of an exorcism, with a thousand like him, but more ferocious, hungrier, all bellowing, roaring, clamoring.
> (Serres 1982: 18)

How and why does a state, a regime, or an individual come to chase the *parasite* – noise or rumor? Doubtless, the process has repeated itself countless times among any and all social groups caught up in even the most basic forms of information politics. In the "Introduction," I examined one instance, recorded by Ibn Iyas, when "rumors" (*ishāʿāt*) provoked a spectacular disciplinary response by the authorities in fourteenth-century Cairo. Globally, the policing of rumor has been noted as an organized activity in ancient Rome, where it was carried out by a special class of *delatores* (Guha 1999: 251); ancient India, where it was among the princely duties described in the *Arthashastra*, a treatise on statecraft (Ibid.: 252); and of course the "rumor clinics" described by Allport and Postman (1947) and Neubauer (1999) in the United States in the twentieth century. Such cases could be multiplied endlessly. However, the precise articulation of the problem, the measures taken against it, and the very conception of rumor (however vague), cannot be claimed as constants across all contexts. There is a specificity to the plans and practices of "combatting rumors" in postcolonial Egypt, whose basic elements can be traced in connection with some of the major political, social, and linguistic ruptures of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Part 1 analyzes the rhetorical and interpretive practices commonly deployed by state actors against rumor, as well as the anxieties that motivate them, while assessing the consequences of this "combat." As both scholarly and polemical works on rumor have often noted, this combat is risky business. "The negative rhetoric of denial," as Neubauer observes, "often has the exactly opposite effect from the one intended" (1999: 130): in denying a rumor, one necessarily repeats it. Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa, an anti-rumor strategist writing in the 1960s, recognizes that the problem requires a more nuanced approach, since "fire cannot not be fought with fire" (or iron with iron, as in the Arabic) (1964: 133). "Confronting rumors," he contends, is as much an "art" (*fann*) (114) as it is a science, and only through a careful mix of personal intuition, "cultural sociology," and "psychology," can the "poison" of rumor be expunged from the social body (134). These remarks resonate with the warning issued by Michel Serres in the above passage on "chasing the parasite." Going after the noise, especially when this entails the use of violence and a vision of total eradication, inevitably leads to the exacerbation of the problem. Rumor, this recalcitrant *parasite*, devours the too-eager agents of combat.

The difficulties are no less for the analyst of rumor combat than they are for its practitioners. When Anwar Sadat, Shaykh Tantawi, or Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa – to mention only a few figures analyzed in the following chapters – speak of *ishāʿāt*, what is it precisely that they are talking about? Are the rumors they speak of really "rumors" – that is, wide-spread, false, anonymous speech – and do they circulate as far and wide as they claim? It is necessary for the reader of these anti-rumor texts to maintain a measure of skepticism, for, as many have observed, "rumor" has a tendency to be exaggerated, if not totally imagined, by its victims. There are two principle reasons for this exaggeration. First, as Patricia Meyer Spacks has argued, the "anxiety aroused by gossip [or rumor] derives partly from its incalculable scope, [as one] can never know

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quite where it goes, whom it reaches, how it changes in transmission, how and by whom it is understood" (1985: 6). The rumored-about individual, possessed by this anxiety, can quite easily begin to "hear things" that have not been said. Going even further, Madame de Saint-Ange, speaking in the Marquis de Sade's *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, advises her protégé to ignore popular gossip, as it is nothing but "hallucinatory scorn" (2007: 221): it does not exist, or have the effects, that one imagines it to have. A second reason for the exaggeration of rumors, especially in the police and intelligence services, is the reward one may receive for their detection. Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby has made this observation about France under Napoleon, where, for the police, "the expectation that conspiracy lurked behind each wall led to a pressure to reports subversive activities [like rumor] even if they did not exist," and thus "police agents fictionalized rumors and dissent in order to be credited with their discovery" (1995: 33). The fictionalization, or at least exaggeration, of rumor, is probably no less rewarding to the social scientist or polemicist, for whom the problematization of an unseen phenomenon offers a considerable amount of interpretive authority.

For these reasons, in the chapters that follow, I am more concerned with the *reactions* to rumor, than I am with the rumors themselves as identifiable cultural forms, or objects of positive knowledge. I nonetheless discuss many rumors, where the historical documentation allows, in order to provide context for particular campaigns of combat. An emphasis on the strategies and styles of "combatting rumors" allows us to better understand the minutiae of state power, its fragilities, and the anxieties that possess its actors in postcolonial Egypt. In Chapter 1, for example, my focus is on the rhetoric deployed by the Free Officers against what they called *ishāʿāt*. Investigating the relative success or failure of these rhetorical strategies offers important insights into the fledgling regime's construction of discursive authority during the chaos and

confusion of the early revolutionary period. In Chapter 2, through a close reading of Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa's book *Rumors, and How we can Confront Them* (1964), my investigation into the "paranoid style" that the author uses against rumors reveals the psychological underpinnings of this common interpretive practice. Finally, Chapter 3 combines the insights of the previous two chapters to analyze the Mubarak regime's attempt to combat rumors in 2007.

A final comment on the organization of these chapters is necessary before proceeding. I have framed Part 1 as an investigation into rumor combat in "postcolonial" Egypt, not because I believe this to be an accurate label for a period of time or for an episteme, ideology, or mindset that prevails during this time, but because, in most of the examples I discuss below, "combatting rumors" is framed by its practitioners as a confrontation with colonialism. When Muhammad Naguib combats *ishāʿāt* in the 1950s, and when Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa "confronts" and analyzes them in the 1960s, they are in nearly every case attributed to *al-mustaʿmir*, "the colonizer." (Mubarak's rhetors, discussed in Chapter 3, do not usually make this connection, but they insist on the related idea of a plot or conspiracy). There are different reasons for this claim, none of which are mutually exclusive: at times, it serves important rhetorical functions (Chapter 1), while at other times, it is a product of a paranoid style of interpretation (Chapter 2). Lastly, by situating my investigation in "postcolonial Egypt," I do not envision a straightforward, linear history of "combatting rumors," of a single practice that has evolved or remained stable as a result of carefully observed historical ruptures or continuities. Rather, I focus what I deem to be three of the "noisiest" encounters between the state and *al-ishāʿa* over the period 1952-2007, while remaining aware of significant gaps, such as the Sadat presidency (1970-1981). It is important to emphasize the specificity of each encounter's historical, ideological, and social setting, in order that the reader not assume rumor combat to be always at the foreground of

Egyptian national politics. It is tempting to expose the anxieties of the powerful as they agonize over *ishāʿāt*, but the phenomenon, and the means deployed against it, must not be inflated beyond their proper proportions. Among the threats to state power, rumor features sometimes as a fatal blow, sometimes as a withering pestilence, sometimes as a blip on the radar, and sometimes as a slight shift in the atmosphere.

Chapter 1: Revolution against Rumors: Rhetoric, Risk, and Courtroom Drama (1952-1954)

Ahmad ʿAtiyyat Allah's *Lexicon of the Egyptian Revolution*, published in 1954, translates the key words of a new national political language that had begun cluttering newspapers and radio waves since the military coup of July 23, 1952. What would eventually be called the "July Revolution" had not only ushered in a rearrangement of the political and economic order; it had also effected a number of linguistic and symbolic transformations that consumers of mass media could not miss. On the same page as *shārat al-thawra* ("Emblem of the Revolution") and *sharikāt al-musāhama* ("joint-stock corporations"), the *Lexicon* includes the following entry:

> Rumours [*shāʾiʿāt*]:
> Or rumors [*ishāʿāt*], the propagation of statements and stories among the public that lack any factual basis. When their aim is to mislead public opinion, they are considered acts of national treason. On this basis, accused persons were taken before the Revolutionary Tribunal under the charge of 'Leading a campaign of rumors, intending thereby to harm the presiding regime and the pillars and foundation of the Revolution,' by way of misleading public opinion. Campaigns of rumor are often connected with acts of espionage by foreign parties. Two so accused were sentenced to hard labor for life, and a third was sentenced to ten years of hard labor.

ʿAtiyyat Allah's entry reveals how an ordinary word has been seized and shaken by history, and imbued with new, multiple layers of meaning. Of course rumor was never an innocent word: always the handmaiden of insurrection, the *bête noire* of language and community. Now it is an act of national treason, of foreign espionage, and its perpetrators are condemned in one of the greatest performances of political theater in Egypt's twentieth century. ʿAtiyyat Allah has thus captured the eruption of a problem, and shortly thereafter, its apparent remedy. At the same

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time, however, by fitting "rumor" into the clean and compact form of the dictionary entry, he masks the confusion and noise which had surrounded its movement in society.

In this chapter, I attempt to reconstruct the noise against which ʿAtiyyat Allah's dictionary entry is partially insulated, with an investigation into the emergence of rumor as an object of state discipline in the early revolutionary period (1952-1954). Through a reading of speeches by Muhammad Naguib and articles by Anwar Sadat, in addition to accounts of the Revolutionary Tribunal of 1953, I examine how the public voices of the Free Officers, from their very first days on the public stage, feverishly attempted to reign in this peculiar threat to their authority. I engage with previous work on rumors in sociology (Kapferer 1990; Morin 1971), cultural history (Neubauer 1999), and linguistic anthropology (Paz 2009) to analyze the rhetorical strategies which the Free Officers deployed against rumors. These strategies include "entextualization" – the reduction of rumor to a text – and the "plot theory" – the accusation of hidden agents behind the rumor. Both of these strategies, I argue, involve for different reasons a tremendous amount of risk, and are prone to misfiring. As a result, the battle against rumors was taken to another rhetorical level: the grand theater of the Revolutionary Tribunal. It was here that the plot theory, once abstract and speculative, could be embodied in the three defendants condemned as "The Trinity of Rumors." The common theme running through these speeches, articles, and trials, I argue, was, more than an attempt to suppress particular rumors, a significant but overlooked process by which the Free Officers attempted to construct their discursive authority. The ability to pronounce on rumors, to frame them, fix them, and discredit them on many occasions allowed the regime to inscribe and reinscribe itself at the top a discursive and epistemological hierarchy. In this sense, a study of rumor combat reveals the constant rhetorical labor required to manufacture state power, in particular given what previous scholars have

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characterized as the instability and fractured nature of the Free Officer's Movement (Di-Capua 2001; Gordon 1992).

Before unpacking the elements of these actors' rumor combat, it is necessary to get a better sense of how "stories and statements that lack any factual basis" – as ʿAtiyyat Allah called them – seemed to have taken over Egyptian public life since July 23, 1952. The fragility of the new "regime," its culture of secrecy, and the temporal frame of revolution, I argue, were important contributing factors to the pervasiveness and potency of rumors.

Standing in the Dark

> A State is never a utilitarian institution pure and simple. It congeals on the surface of time like frost-flowers on a windowpane, and is as unpredictable, as ephemeral and, in its pattern, as rigidly causal to all appearances as they. An impulse of culture, spawned and pushed hither and thither by disparate forces of the most various provenance, finds embodiment in that aggregation of power we call "State," which then seeks some reason for its existence, discovering it perhaps in the glory of a particular house or the excellence of a particular people. (Huizinga 1955 [1938]: 175)

While I have framed "combatting rumors" as a practice of "the state," "the regime," or "state actors," the words of Johan Huizinga remind us of the contingency and complexity of these terms in cultural and political analysis.[26] Never is the state a monolith, nor are the interpretive practices and rhetoric it deploys in the public sphere internally consistent. Certain patterns of organization and authority may "congeal" at certain moments, and are claimed and rationalized by the actors involved, but the consistency they have is maintained only by constant material and symbolic repair.

The fragility and internal dissonance which characterize all states is nowhere more evident than during social and political revolutions. Such was the dilemma that plagued the Free

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[26] For a well-articulated elaboration of this argument as it relates to Arab cultural studies, see Matar (2012).

Officers in the days and years following their entrance onto the public stage. While later years would witness the emergence of the apparatuses and appearances of a strong, almost totalitarian regime, the fragility of this mysterious group of new leaders was at this time apparent to both insiders and outsiders. As Joel Gordon (1992) has argued, the Free Officers had not arrived on the scene with a clear master narrative already worked out, let alone a single plan for the more minor details of day-to-day administration. Their rhetoric of socialism and Pan Arabism, and indeed the cult of personality surrounding Gamal Abdel Nasser, would congeal only after much indecision, miscalculation, and what Gordon repeatedly refers to as "groping about." Moreover, the regime-to-be had yet to secure its monopoly on all sectors of the national media. While radio, and subsequently television, remained under the control of the state, the press in Egypt was not nationalized until 1960. It is not surprising in these circumstances, with the contested and fragmentary nature of the political center, that rumors both true and false would circulate unimpeded, unexplained, and unverified. Certainly multiple perspectives on the "real" could erupt spontaneously, and disappear just as quickly, across this ruptured epistemic terrain whose ostensible custodians were anything but united.

If the officers' lack of control led to uncertainty and rumors, so did, conversely, their very success at imposing constraints and limits on public discourse. Freud, writing of the First World War, made this connection between government control and popular rumormongering:

> The state exacts the utmost degree of obedience and sacrifice from its citizens, but at the same time it treats them like children by maintaining an excess of secrecy and a censorship upon news and expressions of opinion which leaves the spirits of those whose intellects it thus suppresses defenceless against every unfavourable turn of events and every sinister rumour. (1959: 294)

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"Secrecy" and "censorship," in other words, lead people to find news outside of official or authoritative channels of communication. His remarks are echoed by the Egyptian littérateur Ihsan ʿAbd al-Quddus (1919-1990), in an article written on September 7, 1953, in the still independent periodical *Ruz al-Yusuf*, which was run by his mother of the same name. ʿAbd al-Quddus would later gain fame as a prolific writer of cheap romance novels; at this time, though an erstwhile supporter of the Free Officers, his name was associated with the increasing liberal discontent with the military's role in politics. The article in question, entitled "He who Stands in the Dark may Destroy," is a commentary on the secret negotiations going on between the Free Officers – men like President Muhammad Naguib, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and the Minister of National Guidance Salah Salim – and the British, whose forces had yet to withdraw completely from Egypt. In response to a complaint voiced by Salah Salim that the public has been taken over by rumor, ʿAbd al-Quddus offers his own diagnosis of the situation:

> There is a thick black curtain which has descended between the patriotic citizens of Egypt and those responsible for liberating the country [i.e., the Free Officers], so that the former are no longer able to understand, or to form an opinion, or to take a position. We do not understand the difference between "official communications" and "unofficial communications." We do not understand the difference between "written reports" and "unwritten reports." … These secrets, these cryptic signs, this confusion that we suffer: all this leads to caution, and doubt, and expectation … With people in this state of darkness, Salah Salim should not blame them for opening their ears to rumors, and becoming victims to them. People need to hear something to reassure them – and if they find nothing other than rumors, they will listen to them and eagerly seek them out.

Slipping seamlessly from the third person ("the patriotic citizens") to the first ("we"), ʿAbd Al-Quddus densely registers the pain that he and many other users of national media, blameless and patriotic, felt in their unfilled desire for proximity to the truth. The government's secrecy generates a collective affective and psychological state of "confusion … caution … doubt and expectation," which leads, as Freud also observed, to rumors. If the people are not permitted

access to the truth by the government, they will find it nonetheless through their own means. Perhaps they will "open their ears" to strange voices, or perhaps they will create their own stories. ʿAbd Al-Quddus is also raising here the figure of the devil – the one who whispers in the dark – which is so often associated with false talk and rumors.

If certain kinds of rumors would proliferate as a result of confusion and secrecy, others may be explained as the effect of the strained temporal frame of upheaval. Arlette Farge, for example, has argued that historical moments like regime change and riots alter "the social and mental economy of the people and [force] them into quick reactions to facts [that modify] the balance of their lives and aspirations" (1994: 109). Compared with calmer times, people during these "exceptional" periods experience a rapid succession of events, each of which may potentially alter their immediate well-being or future prosperity: a street closure, a curfew, a raid, an election result. More frequently tuned in to changes in their environment, listeners become exceptionally eager for news whether true or false. In the events following from the Free Officers' coup, this temporal immediacy, or "quick reactions to facts," compounded with both a general confusion and uncertainty, and an imposed secrecy on the workings of "those responsible for liberating the country," as Ihsan ʿAbd al-Quddus called them. The unsavory result was a sense – both real and imagined – that rumors were barraging the citizens of Egypt from every direction.

While it is not always clear what "rumors" the Free Officers, or their opponents like Ihsan ʿAbd al-Quddus, were alluding to in their statements, there are several principle themes which prevailed during this time. Divisions and quarrels among the revolutionary leadership were the topic of widespread speculation, and though the leaders exerted great efforts to deny such reports, they were in large part true. Similar in nature were rumors about the arrest or firing

of certain regime members, the noisiest of which erupted after the dismissal, then reinstatement, of Muhammad Naguib as president in February, 1954. Other rumors during this period commented on secret pacts made between the Free Officers and the Muslim Brotherhood, the Wafd Party, the British, or other major foreign and domestic political forces. More examples could be given: it was sometimes being said that the British were planning an attack to reinstate the monarchy; it was being said that the army would never return to the barracks; it was being said, even, that Muhammad Naguib had a mad or illegitimate daughter named Fatma.[27] All of these were *ishāʿāt*, but just as often, this word was used to refer to any kind of discontent or skepticism expressed in the most general manner amongst the public. Anything that the Free Officers could not control, or did not want to admit into the realm of public discourse, could be labeled "rumor."

The image I have thus far created is that of rumors emerging mostly spontaneously, as a popular reaction to the circumstances. Of course this is only part of the story. Rumor could also be used as a weapon, and was used as a weapon, not only by "foreign parties" seeking to "harm the presiding regime and the pillars and foundation of the Revolution" as Ahmad ʿAtiyyat Allah alleged in his lexicon, but also by the Free Officers themselves against foreign and domestic rivals. This hypocrisy should not be surprising: a number of scholars have remarked on authoritarian regimes that, while attempting to suppress subversive speech, also actively disseminate their own covert propaganda.[28] Still, it would be wrong to totally dismiss the claims

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[27] See "Hikayat Bint Muhammad Nagib," *ʾAkhir Saʿa*, 11/11/1953. The other rumors I have listed here appear, obliquely or explicitly, in the texts I analyze below.

[28] Grigsby notes that, while the Napoleonic government was committed to the systematic suppression of rumor, it also did "quite acutely and self-consciously attempt to circulate strategic rumors" (1995: 33). Neubauer, writing of the French *ancien régime*, connects both rumor combat and rumor dissemination to "secret politics": "while there are agents who report to the king what people are saying, there is also a staff which distributes rumours, a procedure that demands a high level of secrecy" (1999: 131). Writing of Haiti in the late twentieth century, Perice argues that authoritarian forces use rumor to spread terror, and to this end they "drive speaking out of open public debate and into the back alleys of rumor" (1997: 1). This would seem to suggest that the suppression of public debate is

made by the regime that "the colonizer," too, was spreading rumors – certainly it was, and as the Tripartite Aggression of 1956 proved, Western designs against Egypt had not ended with the toppling of the pro-British monarchy. However, I have found it important to assert the spontaneity of the phenomenon, given that claims about rumor's calculated design have so often been overstated. Particularly when couched in the language of "plots" and "conspiracies," the common allegation about the authorship of rumor constitutes an important tool in the rhetoric of combat. It is a rhetorical tool among others deployed by spokesmen for the Free Officers, whose public speech I now analyze.

Combatting Rumors: Naguib and Sadat

On July 24, 1952, Muhammad Naguib went on the radio to broadcast a short message in defense of the military coup that had brought him and his fellow officers to power only the previous day.[29] Viewed from the present, the message reveals much about the new regime's provisional and rapidly shifting sense of its place in the world. Naguib himself was still *General* Naguib, not yet President of the Republic – the title he would soon adopt and carry until November 1954. Collectively, he and his army brethren were responsible for what he called "our movement" – it was yet to be dubbed a "revolution." Even those on the receiving end of his message were not yet what history would soon make of them: Naguib addressed his audience as "the sons of the Nile Valley," in partial reference to the Sudan, still nominally part of Egypt, and birthplace of the general himself. The word "Egypt" never occurs in his speech, only "the people," "the

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primarily for the regime to spread rumors; the causal chain is certainly more complex than this, and is anyway beyond the scope of this chapter. It is not only "dictatorial" or "authoritarian" regimes that use rumor to manufacture consent and spread terror; the so-called "advanced democracies" deploy the same methods. FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover's "Responsibilities Program," launched in the 1950s and 1960s to defame teachers, is one example. For a more recent example from the George W. Bush administration, see "U.S. Videos, for TV News, Come under Scrutiny," *The New York Times*, 3/15/2004.

[29] *Al-Akhbar*, 7/25/1952.

homeland," and "the country." With both sender and receiver of this message still so vaguely defined, it is no surprise that the signals it transmitted across space would be offset by a considerable amount of noise.

The message represents one of the Free Officers' first attempts to combat rumor – a theme that would recur again and again in the speeches delivered by Muhammad Naguib until his final days as president. In this case, the problem, like the speaker and audience, is vaguely defined. "I am eager to speak to you myself," the general begins, "in order to put a stop to the hateful, malicious rumors spread by your enemies and the enemies of the nation." Contrary to the "weak souls" who "persist in spreading rumors," Naguib insists that the army's movement, blessed by the people, has good intentions, and aims for "reform" and "purification." He concludes his brief message by telling his audience not to "listen to rumors," having thus pronounced the word *shāʾiʿāt* for a magical third time.

In at least four subsequent speeches over the next two years, Naguib would return to repeat his admonition. In a speech delivered at the American University in Cairo in March, 1953, the president waxed indignant about the excess of demands being made on the revolutionary leadership. Speaking in colloquial Egyptian, his remarks were winding, and included an abrupt, off-the-collar complaint about "the rumors that are filling the country": "a new rumor every day! Who are these people, compared to us?"[30] In September of the same year, Naguib lectured on the dangers of rumors to workers at a General Motors factory in Alexandria[31], and to crowds in Cairo[32]. In the latter speech, the president transcended the vagueness of his previous statements to provide a greater amount of detail, if still somewhat general in nature, about the threat, its perpetrators, its victims, and its possible remedy. The

[30] *Al-Musawwir*, 5/5/1953.
[31] *Al-Akhbar*, 9/3/1953
[32] *Al-Akhbar*, 9/16/1953.

"rumors" (both *shāʾiʿāt* and *ishāʿāt*) in question allege that the members of the country's revolutionary leadership are divided and feuding amongst themselves. The victims are the people (*al-shaʿb*), whose "trust in themselves is shaken," and whose "trust in their leaders is shaken." The agents of rumor are "colonialism" (*al-istiʿmār*), "the colonizer" (*al-mustaʿmir*), "the supporters of the colonizer" (*aʿwānuhu*), and "the reactionary elements" *(al-ʿanāṣir al-ragʿiyya)*. These figurations of the enemy, along with "rumor" itself, featured among the key words of the new language crafted by the Free Officers to organize and make sense of a rapidly changing world. They may be interpreted as euphemisms for the British and their local sympathizers among the aristocracy, but functionally they signified any perceived adversary, foreign or domestic, of the revolutionary leadership. Having outlined the nature and origins of the threat, Naguib then projects an image of the battle to come: "We are concerned about the effects these rumors have had on the minds of the weak," he says, before declaring that there are many citizens who still require "national upbringing" (*al-tarbiya al-waṭaniyya*) and "correct guidance" (*al-tawgīh al-ṣaḥīḥ*). The broad, open nature of the problem thus allows the problematizers (Naguib and the regime) equally broad, open powers of response. Finally, in a fourth speech delivered on July 23, 1954 – the second anniversary of the Free Officers' coup – Naguib repeats this same admonition.[33] Yet he is almost certainly outperformed by the master rhetor, Gamal Abdel Nasser. The latter, rather than using so vulgar a word as "rumors," warns citizens against "those who have made doubting, incitement, and cowardly whispering their trade."

Over the same period, from 1952 through 1954, Muhammad Naguib's lecturing on *ishāʿāt* was echoed by the other major public voices of the fledgling regime. Prominent among them was Anwar Sadat, a colonel in the army and one of the few members of the revolutionary

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[33] *Al-Akhbar*, 7/23/1954.

leadership to so frequently appear on radio, in the newspapers, and on stage. Before his assumption of the presidency upon the death of Nasser in 1970, Sadat was also well known for his close involvement in and supervision of the press, including his management of the state-owned *al-Gumhuriyya* in the 1950s, and his attempt to pacify Mustafa Amin's *Akhbar al-Yawm* in the 1960s (cf. Chapter 6). Two articles written in the former publication offer a glimpse of the colonel's own battle with rumors, which relied on rhetorical tropes similar to those deployed by Muhammad Naguib. On December 7, 1953, Sadat wrote a lengthy piece about what he called "a new weapon" (*silāḥ gadīd*).[34] "The politicians," he alleges, referring to Egypt's discredited liberal political class, whose pre-revolutionary feuds had led many to welcome the military takeover, "have since the changing of their fortunes resorted to a change in their strategies." Most dangerous among these strategies is the "new weapon," rumor. Perhaps rumors had existed before, but with this phrase, Sadat has, like Naguib before him, attempted to manufacture a new problem in the minds of his audience, a problem that requires attention, vigilance, analysis, and response. What makes this weapon qualitatively different from others is its special "flash" or "blaze" (*barīq*); it is a "blazing" (*barrāq*) weapon. Thus, just as Muhammad Naguib had feared rumor's "effects on the minds of the weak," so does Sadat claim that "people's minds have been truly susceptible" to the subversive speech of the politicians. While Naguib had accused "the colonizer" of wielding this weapon, however, Sadat accuses "politicians," whom he identifies as members of the Wafd Party and the Muslim Brotherhood – in other words, domestic adversaries of the revolutionary leadership. The same accusations are leveled again by Sadat in an article written on March 10, 1954.[35] Ratcheting up his rhetoric of demonization, he characterizes the rumormongers as "those who have crawled out of their holes to broadcast incitement and spread

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[34] *Al-Gumhuriyya*, 12/7/1953.
[35] *Al-Gumhuriyya*, 3/10/1954.

doubt." Now rumors have reached such a pitch that he fears they have become "a customary trick pulled on the people" (*ʿāda tanṭalī ʿala al-nās*).

The speeches of Muhammad Naguib and the articles of Anwar Sadat rely on two common rhetorical strategies to combat rumor: "entextualization" and "the plot theory." By entextualization, I mean the reproduction of a rumor in a text, such as a speech or newspaper article. In his account of the "rumor clinics" designed by social scientists working for the United States government during and after World War II, Neubauer (1999) analyzes this strategy of putting rumor into writing. Rumor clinic analysts would place articles in newspapers to respond to certain widely circulating stories, and in doing so, they reproduced the orally transmitted story in print. As Neubauer explains, these articles would

> oppose the fleeting, ephemeral and intermittent text of the rumour with the relatively constant – that is to say repeatable and recognizable – medium of centrally printed text. The space of writing stands against the non-spatial, uncontoured and mobile principle of hearsay, which lasts only a moment before disappearing, and then perhaps reappearing shortly thereafter. In the place of the mobile web of drifting variants, versions and quotes, in the place of the anonymous series of voices, it publishes a single, reproducible text. (139-140)

Placing a rumor in print would in a sense reduce it to print, rather than the unfathomably complex social phenomenon that it really is.[36] As a consequence, the threat is taken down to size, and transformed into a rather simple bite that can be countered and combatted. Such is the effect, too, of the texts cast by Muhammad Naguib and Anwar Sadat to contain rumors of government division or incompetence.

Of course there is an inevitable risk in entextualization. By citing the rumor, even if it is in reduced form, the authors not only repeat its content, but broadcast it to a vastly wider

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[36] Patricia Meyer Spacks makes a similar argument about the reproduction of gossip in novels: "In being written down … [gossip is] stabilized: made safe … Far less dangerous than its oral equivalent, gossip converted to fiction keeps its place on the page – not in the air between two speakers, not subject to incalculable elaboration or speculation" (1985: 14).

audience. Thus the rumor is like a virus, infecting all those with whom it comes into contact, even the agents of "purification" and "guidance." This may help explain why Naguib and Sadat were sometimes reticent about mentioning specific rumors, preferring instead to make vague declarations about their effects on people and the mistrust they were creating between the revolutionary leadership and citizens. This was the case with Naguib's radio address on July 24, 1952, in which he merely alluded to "rumors" about "our movement," without providing further details. Yet his speech of July 23, 1954, makes full citation of the rumor in the form of denial: "The members of the Leadership are as one hand, and are not divided" (*aʿḍāʾ al-qiyāda yad wāḥida wa laysū mutafarriqīn*). We may interpret this act of entextualization as running the risk of repetition, and failing in its aim to combat the rumor. On the other hand, if we consider history, it may be precisely the repetition and broadcast of this particular rumor that Naguib desires. Earlier, in February of the same year, Naguib had been forced to resign as president by rivals within the revolutionary leadership, before a backlash had him reinstated. He would continue as president until November, but it would have been apparent to many that his role was more of a formality than anything else. "Denying" this rumor about division within the leadership − that is, *repeating* it in a loud voice − was perhaps Naguib's way of obliquely communicating to the nation his disagreement with the impotent role he was being forced to perform; it may even have been his way of undermining the regime that would force him out of office permanently after a few short months. Thus the "entextualization" or rumor is a fraught process, and one that can equally serve the purposes of containment and communication.[37]

The second major rhetorical strategy common to both Naguib and Sadat is the "plot theory," a term I borrow from French sociologist Edgar Morin (1971). In his words, it is the

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[37] This is what Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa, in his book *Rumors, and How We can Confront Them* (1964), identifies as "the condemnatory method" (*al-uslūb al-istinkārī*) for spreading rumors: a rumormonger expresses his disapproval of a particular story, thus introducing it, perhaps for the first time, as a topic of speculation and debate (80).

"tendency to localise the cause and origin of the phenomenon in the conscious will, and actions, of malicious individual agents" (84). This, of course, is what the Free Officers repeated in nearly all of their public discourses, whether they were discussing rumors or not: the confusion and disturbances that had spread in the papers, cafes, streets, and clubs of Cairo were the result of a plot. In the articles and speeches I described above, the plotters behind the rumors were usually called out with labels more or less vague. If Muhammad Naguib's initial radio address had mentioned only "your enemies and enemies of the nation," stock phrases like "the colonizer," "the supporters of the colonizer," and "reactionary elements" would soon gain greater currency. Morin stresses the important sense-making power of the plot theory. If rumors are seemingly everywhere, ephemeral, and without a clear origin or purpose, the plot theory reduces this complexity to a more manageable figure of speech: the effect is to "endow … rumour with form and substance, to give it a face, an author, an objective. The rumour [is] not merely slanderous, but a 'campaign of slander'" (83). This, indeed, was precisely the language deployed by the regime, who, as ʿAtiyyat Allah reported in his lexicon, spoke of a "campaign of rumors," rather than spontaneous rumor outbreaks.[38] This reduction is important, for it allows the authorities to respond to the rumors, indeed to combat them, precisely as one would combat an individual slander, or group of slanderers, in court. One cannot, after all, contend with random noise, only sensible and embodied discourse.

Morin suggests another function of the plot theory. His study investigates rumors that erupted in the town of Orléans in 1969, to the effect that young girls who shopped at Jewish-

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[38] Morin's remarks also help explain that commonplace of modern Arabic political rhetoric – "These rumors have no basis in fact, **and their aim is** such-and-such" (*hādhihi al-shāʾiʿāt* [*aw: al-akhbār*] *lā asās lahā min al-ṣiḥḥa, al-hadaf minhā kadha wa kadha*). We now see why this tag – *al-hadaf minhā* – is so necessary: the shapeless and unconfirmed stories are given a clear purpose, so they can be combatted with similar purpose. The effect is also achieved by another common collocation, *ishāʿāt mughriḍa* ("malicious/targetted rumors"). A reader will find these words uttered by a government official in almost every Arabic news bulletin on almost any day.

owned clothing stores were being abducted and coerced into the "white slave trade." While these rumors had no particular point of origin that could be identified, a "plot theory" was quickly hatched that the whole commotion had been launched by a group of Neo-Nazis, or some other anti-Semitic faction, with the aim of harming Jews. The theory, like the rumor, was a work of fiction, but it served an important purpose. Not only would it clarify a complex phenomenon, as we have seen, but it also helped to "denounce [the rumor] as something alien to the indigenous community, a foreign body that had infiltrated Orléans unbeknown to the town's inhabitants" (84). Jean-Noël Kapferer, also a sociologist, elaborates on the significance of this kind of denunciation, which he calls "changing the rumor's image" (1990: 253). The transmission of a rumor, he suggests, depends in large part on the social value it holds for its transmitters. Once the rumor is shown not only to lack such value, but to actually be foreign and enemy to the social group of the transmitter (in Morin's case, it comes from Neo-Nazis), the act of passing on a juicy story becomes more akin to passing around rotten produce: something best to be avoided. The rumor's image has changed, and the result is that for the target population, it has become "unseemly to speak of" (250). This is why, most often, Naguib and Sadat affiliate rumor with a foreign group, such as the British, or a discredited internal group, such as the aristocracy or the Wafd Party. It is not my intention to deny that foreign powers, such as Great Britain, did indeed have agents in Egypt who were busy spreading false reports and propaganda in order to destabilize the new regime. But the persistent and almost automatic reference to a foreign plot, I argue, serves important rhetorical functions, which can be understood with insights from these sociological studies of rumor.

Like entextualization, however, the plot theory as a rhetorical strategy entails risk. Would all members of the public remain so naïve about a claim so often repeated? Even with the

presence of the British on Egyptian soil, might not labels like "enemies" and "supporters of the colonizer," so vague and unsubstantiated, eventually seem to be referring to nothing at all? Morin, for his part, argued that the plot theory was in fact the most successful strategy deployed against the rumors in Orléans. The association of the anti-Jewish rumors with Neo-Nazis seemed to stick, and residents of the town began shying away from them. Allport and Postman (1947), however, explicitly disapproved of the use of the plot theory, citing the risk of reduced credibility. This was coming from the very social scientists who had participated in the "rumor clinics" in the United States in the mid-twentieth century.

At least one voice in Egypt during this period had a similar response to the regime's rhetoric of rumor combat. Ihsan ʿAbd al-Quddus, who I cited above as a voice of skepticism, would repeat his critique of the revolutionary leadership in a famous article entitled, "The Secret Society that Governs Egypt."[39] Published on March 22, 1954, the scathing article would land its author in prison. The "secret society" of the title is the "real" revolutionary leadership, who ʿAbd al-Quddus accuses of hiding behind front men like President Muhammad Naguib. Salah Salim, for example, "never appears," and Gamal Abdel Nasser, the original *éminence grise*, would be photographed "sitting in the third or fourth row." According to ʿAbd al-Quddus, people in Egypt have become more and more unsettled by the constant surprise decisions announced by the leadership, and the contradictory statements they make. Indeed, he says, people "do not trust the leaders when they say that they are combatting reactionary elements and the supporters of colonialism, because they do not understand the meaning of 'reactionary elements' and 'supporters of colonialism'." Quite clearly, then, if we are to believe Ihsan ʿAbd al-Quddus, the regime's plot theory of rumors was falling on deaf ears. The rhetoric of Muhammad Naguib and Anwar Sadat was running the risk of miscomprehension, or worse, the

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[39] *Ruz al-Yusuf*, 3/22/1954.

risk of backfiring. Speculation increased, rumors spread and spread, and something else had to

be done to put an stop to all the noise.

Rumor at the Revolutionary Tribunal: *Indigitamenta* of the Trinity

In his article, Ihsan ʿAbd al-Quddus also provides a simple, and I think quite accurate, etiological

sequence to describe the regime's rumor combat. "These contradictions," he says of the

leadership's sudden and unexplained public announcements,

> have made people lose trust in what they are told, whether it is an official statement or an
> unofficial statement, even if the official were to swear on the Holy Quran. This lack of
> trust has lead, in turn, to the spreading of rumors and the uneasiness in public opinion.
> And this forced the leaders to use violence, and to establish the Revolutionary Tribunal.

Writing in March, 1954, ʿAbd al-Quddus makes a direct connection between the popular distrust

of military officials, the problem of rumors, and the Revolutionary Tribunal, which was

established in September of 1953. It is this connection which I would now like to explore

further: how precisely did the tribunal operate in the junta's combatting of rumors? What

symbolic work did it perform that had not been achieved by the previous year of speeches and

newspaper articles, and to what extent did it succeed in its aims?

The Revolutionary Tribunal heard its first case in September 24, 1953, and continued into

the following spring. While it was not the first court established by the new regime to try

representatives of the *ancien régime*, it was distinguished in its authority to hand out real prison

terms, as well as the death penalty, and thus represented a serious attempt by the revolutionary

leadership to assert their hegemony over Egyptian politics after a series of embarrassments

(Gordon 1992: 87). In terms of political theater, it was a moment for the new leaders to shine.

Its proceedings were broadcast over the radio, and, as Litvin observes, it was a "running drama

[that] featured fine performances by the Free Officers and some of those accused" (2011: 38). While much of the drama, as well as subsequent scholarly attention, centered on corruption and treason charges leveled against Wafd Party leaders, such as Fuʾad Sirag al-Din (eg. Gordon: 87-91), a significant part of the Revolutionary Tribunal was dedicated to the prosecution of alleged "rumormongers." Perhaps, as Ihsan ʿAbd al-Quddus argued, it was even "rumors" that had led to the establishment of the tribunal in the first place.

Case No. 6 of the Revolutionary Tribunal, which lasted from October 6 to 11, 1953, was brought against Ahmad Nasif, an official in the Ministry of Justice; Zaki Zahran, a former member of the police, now on pension; and Mustafa Shahin, an official at the Ministry of Social Affairs. The three seem to be rather ordinary public employees, with no particular connection to the *ancien régime* save for alleged family ties, several degrees removed, to the former prime minister Mustafa al-Nahhas. Shahin, the third defendant, had been tried and acquitted of corruption charges during an earlier revolutionary court, though the other two defendants were making their appearance in the public spotlight for the first time. Together, they stood accused of "treason, and the spreading of false rumors" (*khiyānat al-waṭan, tarwīg al-ishāʿāt al-kādhiba)* (Kayra 1953: 1109-1111). The court had dubbed the three of them together "The Trinity of Rumors" (*thālūth al-ishāʿāt*) (Ibid: 1108). Nasif was given a sentence of "hard labor for life," Zahran was given fifteen years of hard labor, and Shahin ten years.

Why is Rumor here? Why does the Trinity of Rumors appear before the Revolutionary Tribunal? At its simplest, the case can be read as an act of embodiment, in which the oft-touted threat of rumors, and most importantly the elusive "reactionary elements" alleged to stand behind them, are made manifest to the Egyptian public. The rumormongers are produced in the flesh, apprehended and comprehended, and the "plot theory" that Naguib, Sadat, and other regime

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تالوث الإشاعات والأكاذيب
احمد نصيفه ــ وزكى زهران ــ ومصطفى شاهين

Figure 1: "The Trinity of Rumors and Lies: Ahmad Nasif – Zaki Zahran – Mustafa Shahin"
(From *al-Madbata al-Rasmiyya li-Mahadir Jalasat Mahkamat al-Thawra* [The Official Minutes from the Session Records of the Revolutionary Tribunal], 1953: 332)

rhetors had been peddling to skeptical audiences for months is given some supporting evidence.

But the spectacle of the trial holds a more sublime symbolic potential, I believe, that can be

understood quite appropriately as a modern iteration of the Roman *indigitamenta*, which social

theorist Johan Huizinga explains thus:

> An official rite whereby new divinities were installed in times of violent public
> excitement, with a view to tranquilizing these outbursts of collective emotion by giving
> them fixed form as sacred entities. It was a brilliant psychological trick for resolving
> dangerous social tensions and exorcising them by projection and propitiation. (1955:
> 139)[40]

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[40] Indeed, as Huizinga goes on to argue, such rites of personification have not vanished in the modern era. He asks:
"Which of us has not repeatedly caught himself addressing some lifeless object, say a recalcitrant collar-stud, in

What Huizinga calls "a brilliant psychological trick" I have framed as rhetoric and drama; the effect is the same. Through courtroom drama, the junta sought to deliver to wide audiences, which included the officers themselves, an almost "divine" figure for the "dangerous social tension" of rumor: they called it the "Trinity of Rumors."

The full transcript of the trial, published by the Revolutionary Tribunal in the same year, allows us to take a seat in the drama and appreciate the symbolic labor of this *indigitamenta* in great detail. To my knowledge, the transcript has not been the object of previous scholarship, even by the otherwise comprehensive account constructed by Joel Gordon (1992) of the Free Officers' politics in the early revolutionary period. Following rumor has thus led us into an otherwise neglected scene of great significance in Egyptian public culture and politics, which can contribute to our understanding of the intersections between discipline, spectacle, power, performance, and communications technologies in the early revolutionary period. Future scholars can benefit from a closer study of the other cases recorded in this transcript. I focus on the *indigitamenta* of Case No. 6, which unfolds through successive rhetorical strategies aimed at problematizing, fixing, and externalizing the threat of rumors.

On October 6, the first day of the proceedings, the Public Prosecutor Ibrahim Sami Jadd al-Haqq railed against the defendants in a high, moralistic register thick with metaphor and Quranic allusions: "Justices of the People! Today we present before you a new kind of accusation [*lawnan gadīdan min al-ittihām*] and a new kind of criminal." He continued:

> This tiny group has exploited the mercy of the Revolution, and the noble manner of the
> Free Leaders, by disturbing the order, and spreading corruption across the land. By

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deadly earnest, attributing to it a perverse will, reproaching it and abusing it for its demoniacal obstinacy?" (140). This is a quite precise description of the regime's problematization and personification of the rumor, as a sort of living being with a will of its own and a "demoniacal obstinacy."

spraying their poisons, by spreading false, malicious rumors and deceptive, wicked propaganda, they have thought themselves capable of obstructing the caravan of the Free… (Kayra 1953: 354-355)

The prosecutor's introduction echoes the words used by Anwar Sadat – one of the tribunal's three members – in the article he was to publish only a few months later in *al-Gumhuriyya*: "rumors," Sadat would later say, constituted a "new weapon." What exactly was "new" about rumors? Certainly it was not the phenomenon itself, or its use in psychological warfare. The novelty in this case relates to the rhetor's assumption of popular naïveté about the origins, uses, and effects of reported speech, the assumption that most members of the audience had never paused to consider something called *al-ishāʿa* as posing a threat to the wider community. Thus the bombastic recitation of its effects: rumor "disturbs the order," "spreads corruption across the land," and "obstructs the caravan of the Free." If the public had been unaware that chit-chat was such a problem, they were being warned to be more careful in the future. If they had thought talk to be nothing but talk, the rhetor was to instill in them a sense of panic that everyday conversation might be tainted with foreign "poisons." The claim of rumor's novelty also has the same dramatic effect as the uncovering of a secret. A rare, hidden problem is found, and it is valuable and significant precisely because it had been hidden. The rhetor shares this discovery with the audience, thus creating a certain degree of intimacy with them and, it would be hoped, a bond of trust. At the same time, while rumor is being presented as new and unknown, its demonic nature is delivered to the audience in the familiar language of the Quran: they "spread corruption across the land" (*taʿīthu fī al-arḍ fasādan*). In this way, the novel form is made fathomable, rooted in the depths of evil.

The prosecution, with the aid of three witnesses, also goes to great lengths to entextualize the rumors, presenting them in the fixed and manageable form of testimonies, alleged recordings

of the defendants, and copies of letters and calling cards, all of which are preserved in the published transcript. The first witness wastes no time citing the "rumors" word for word. Ahmad Nasif, one of the accused, is alleged to have said that the regime "wants to sedate the people," that "the English had occupied the area form Ismailia to Zaqaziq," and that merchants and officers across the country were "muttering and complaining" (338). The prosecutor refines his question, asking the witness what more the defendant had said about "the men of the movement" (i.e. the Free Officers). The move is an obvious attempt to sharpen the rumors, mostly vague and general in nature, into directly personal attacks on the very men who had appointed themselves judges. The witness takes the bait, and proceeds to relate a comment that Nasif had made about the mother of ʿAbd al-Hakim ʿAmir, a prominent member of the junta (339). The next two witnesses repeat much of the same, while disagreeing about which members of the "Trinity" were actually involved. The "rumors" in question are all variations on the theme of the regime's fragmentation, and the superior might of the British. Even though the third witness expresses some reticence to report what he had heard, the chief judge of the tribunal, ʿAbd al-Latif al-Baghdadi, demands that "it [all] must be said here" (347). Thus it is clear that the tribunal is eager to have the rumors repeated, not only to grasp them and put them in fixed form, but to display the power to have such speech forced out of the witnesses and the defendants. In addition to the rumors themselves, private letters and calling cards addressed to Nasif are marshaled as evidence of his collusion with a British man named "Martin." The effect of all this is obvious: the problem of rumor is externalized through association with foreign imperialism. The Trinity of Rumors may be operating on Egyptian soil, but its origins are to be found in a zone of otherness.

Another important rhetorical strategy used to solidify the phantom rumormongers is their grounding in a socially significant, indeed a stigmatized, *topos*. It seems that most of the rumors launched in this "campaign" were merely scattered orally in the street, but it was a specific location that imbued this speech with demonic powers. The importance of "place," as Roland Barthes reminds us in his review of classical rhetoric, is to more easily engender a particular "association of ideas" in the mind of the rhetor, and thus the audience. Places are "the compartments" in which an argument is "arranged" (1988: 65). It is alleged that the "trinity" plied their wicked trade at a cigarette stand – a *topos* invested with dark associations of social and moral promiscuity, an archetypical rumor-mill. The prosecutor labels it "the loathsome lair" (*al-wakr al-ḥaqīr*) from which their "rumors of evil flew from borough to borough, then from city to city, to cover the entire country, leaving people caught between belief in what they heard, and the truth of what they saw" (356). It is, moreover, alleged that the owner of the cigarette stand, a man named Ibrahim ʿUthman, is a "prattler," a "pimp," a "drug dealer," and a "hashish-smoker." "Ibrahim" is an ambiguous figure, at once accused of moral profligacy, and used by the prosecution as a major source of information on the defendants. His role is contested, with the defense highlighting his immorality and perpetual state of drunkenness, and the prosecution attempting to brush this immorality off onto the defendants by association, while paradoxically seizing on his testimony as evidence of the "trinity's" rumormongering. The rhetorical intent, in any case, is to posit a launch pad for the rumormongers, fixing their origin onto a place deemed to have notorious social acoustics.

What is remarkable about the trial is how articulate and convincing the defense lawyers – in particular Zuhayr Garana, who defended Ahmad Nasif – managed to be. The three witnesses, in addition to the cigarette dealer "Ibrahim," are pointedly exposed as contradictory liars, and the

latter as an agent of the secret police. Much of the prosecution's evidence – including the letters sent to, but not written by, Ahmad Nasif – was supposed to have been "photographed" by Ibrahim. How, asked the defense, had Ibrahim managed to "photograph" these documents, as it was supposed, on the staircase? The prosecution stutters, and suggests awkwardly that Ibrahim's "copying" (*taṣwīr*) of the letter was by hand, not by camera (378). This would seem to contradict the evidence of the published transcript itself, which includes photocopies of these documents in its appendix. In all, the allegations against the "trinity" seem to have been rather shoddily thrown together, and based largely on the evidence provided by security agents, including Ibrahim, under pressure to provide some random three individuals to stand in for the role of rumormonger that had already been scripted. The almost obvious disintegration of the prosecution's case shortly after the proceedings had begun could be read as an infelicitous performance on the part of the Revolutionary Tribunal. Any of these potential embarrassments, however, would be largely beside the point, as the judges were quick to confirm the sentencing of the Trinity only five days after the trial had begun.

How successful, or felicitous, was the Revolutionary Tribunal in its prosecution of the Trinity of Rumors? Ihsan ʿAbd al-Quddus, in his article on Egypt's "secret society," concluded his analysis by noting that "the policy of violence succeeded in terrifying the people, so they went quiet, and the rumors abated for a time; however, it did not succeed in restoring people's trust in their leaders." Joel Gordon, while not mentioning the effect the trials had on rumors, largely agrees with this assessment that the Revolutionary Tribunal's most significant impact was its intimidation of opponents. He notes, however, the many spectators must have remained "ambivalent" at best, and "alienated" at worst (1992: 90-91). Surely it is impossible to gauge the accuracy of ʿAbd al-Quddus's observation that "rumors abated" – which rumors and where? –

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but it is clear in any case that after the tribunal, the rhetoric of rumor combat practiced by Naguib, Sadat, and others would continue. One may review the dates of the speeches and articles I analyzed above, which come before, during, and after the prosecution of the unfortunate three rumormongers. But the rhetoric and drama of rumor combat had another, more important function that the extinguishing of particular stories in circulation. By giving themselves the ability to frame, fix, and prosecute rumor, the Free Officers were constructing their authority as evaluators of truth and discourse.

The production of this kind of authority is demonstrated by Alejandro Paz in an article on the use of the words *chisme* ("gossip") and *rumor* in a Latino community in Israel. By analyzing the response of a prominent community member to an anonymous attack, Paz shows "how an authoritative structure is produced as part of reconstituting a perspective on events with the descriptor *chisme*" (2009: 133). That is, the successful labeling of an adversary's speech with a word like "rumor" or *ishāʿa* helps project the interpretive and discursive authority of the labeler. The Free Officers were performing this authority over and over again through the repeated labeling and prosecution of rumor in speeches, in articles, and in court. Every time they spoke against rumor, they would be indexing their own supremacy as credible evaluators of public speech. The more this supremacy was perceived to be under threat, the more elaborate they were in their hectoring, their admonishing, and their drama. By raising three rather ordinary public employees to the level of a demonic trinity, they were also raising themselves into divinity.

Conclusion

The prodigious playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898-1987), not long after the death of President Gamal Abdel Nasser, wrote a scathingly critical review of what had become of the "revolution"

launched on July 23, 1952. In his attempt to give a straightforward account of the early revolutionary period, however, he admits that there remain "many rumors, or facts, that history will need to closely examine someday" (1974: 26). The discursive and epistemological noise perceived by Muhammad Naguib, Anwar Sadat, and their opponent Ihsan ʿAbd al-Quddus, among many other users and consumers of mass media during the period 1952-1954, thus presents as much confusion to subsequent attempts at analysis as it did to the contemporary practitioners of combat. My principle aim in this chapter, however, was not to seek a convincing explanation for particular rumors, whether spontaneous or deliberately weaponized, or to speculate on their validity. Rather, I have sought to understand how rumor emerged as a problem, and why particular rhetorical and dramatic strategies were deployed against it. I also speculated on the felicity of these strategies, which were prone to the considerable risk of misfiring.

Undoubtedly, as opponents of the regime like Ihsan ʿAbd al-Quddus asserted, "rumors" (*ishāʿāt*) were an observable nuisance to public dialogue, and had perhaps reached endemic proportions in the confusion and secrecy that followed from the July Revolution. However, the revolutionary leadership was also in large part responsible for creating the problem, in a number of ways. As ʿAbd al-Quddus argued, the contradictory nature of regime rhetoric, and the culture of secrecy they fostered, had created an atmosphere in which ordinary citizens could only make sense of things through alternative means. Rumors, whether as bits of information or more complex narratives, offered them what their leaders failed to produce. These leaders also "created" rumor in another sense. Through a consistent rhetoric of combat, which culminated but did not end with the Revolutionary Tribunal, the directors of the new political theater attempted (consciously or not) to craft a new language for, and cast new images of, the threats to

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their authority. Prominent among these threats was "rumor," something so diffuse, ephemeral, and recalcitrant that it could only be contained through the violent apprehension of an effigy. Whether or not the Free Officers were convincing in the specters they manufactured, it is quite likely that the material and symbolic labor they performed under the rubric of "combatting rumors" had succeeded in casting *al-ishāʿa* in a supporting, if only occasional, role in Egyptian public culture for years to come. If we are to locate a moment when, in the history of modern Egypt, rumor comes into its own as a *problem*, as "a new kind of crime," surely it is the Revolutionary Tribunal. If we are to identify one performance that would make *al-ishāʿa* a star – a recurring, if not always constant, figure on the stage of social and political anxieties attended by literature, journalism, and the arts (cf. the remaining chapters of this dissertation) – we cannot second guess the divinity of the Trinity of Rumors.

Their efforts were not totally unique. "Combatting rumors" is a practice which needs to be placed in a wider postcolonial context, as other emerging authoritarian regimes in the Arab World, such as Libya, Syria, and Iraq, would adopt not altogether different rhetorical and dramatic strategies. The practice, in fact, was as much a product of the times: countries on both sides of World War II had targeted "rumor" and "gossip" with systematic campaigns of eradication (cf. Neubauer 1999). At the same time that Muhammad Naguib and Anwar Sadat were lecturing to the Egyptian people on *ishāʿāt*, "rumor clinics" and related campaigns of rumor debunking were launched by American government agencies, private corporations, journalists, and social scientists. Indeed, as I explained in the "Introduction," "rumor" as we know it today might be said to have emerged as an object of concern in the early twentieth century, at the intersection of state disciplinary practices and "legislative" social science.[41] It is no surprise,

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[41] The designation of certain social sciences as "legislative" is borrowed from Bauman (1992), for whom the label signified scientific projects allied with the modern state's ideology of development, social engineering and control.

then, that *ishāʿāt* would also migrate from the docks of the Revolutionary Tribunal into new works of Egyptian sociology and social psychology. In this migration, rumor would be sustained and nourished as a "problem." If show trials and government rhetoric lightened up slightly on the topic, it is in the work of one sociologist in the 1960s that we are able to register the persistence and paranoia of the problem.

Chapter 2: Paranoia and the Plan: Confronting Rumors in a Time of *Takhṭīṭ* (1964)

In this chapter, I analyze what is most likely the first book-length study of rumor in modern Egypt: Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa's *Rumors, and How We Can Confront Them*, published in 1964. Although it is a marginal work, whose author is not well known and whose circulation is a matter of pure speculation, it captures another significant historical moment when rumors re-emerged as a problem – a threat and a question, an object of analysis – for state actors. Specifically, ʿIsa's book articulates the language and anxieties immanent to so-called *takhṭīṭ* or "Planning": the teleological project of developmentalist modernity, which had reached its pinnacle in the same year with the completion of the first phase of the Aswan High Dam. ʿIsa's confrontation with rumors is premised on the "noise" or interference that they present to the regime's *takhṭīṭ*, as they distract citizen-subjects and set development off course.

What interests me most in ʿIsa's book is the author's insistence on the "plot theory" of rumors: the rhetorical device deployed by the Free Officers in Chapter 1 has now attained a fervor and persistence that calls for further analysis. I find it necessary here to challenge the sociological interpretation of the plot theory as a conscious rhetorical device, and to refigure it in terms of what political scientists and anthropologists have called the "paranoid style." Building on Hofstadter's seminal article on the topic (1996), in addition to work on conspiracy theory in anthropology (Marcus 1999; Stewart 1999), media studies (Bratich 2008), and political science (Gray 2010), I conceive of this "paranoid style" not as a conscious rhetorical device, nor as a totalized ideology, but as an interpretive *practice* conditioned by history and lodged in set of dominant ideals about human action and agency. Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa applies the paranoid style to *ishāʿāt*, finding them in every case to be the work of robustly agentive conspirators.

While this paranoia is in one sense a reaction to the history of colonialism and foreign plots hatched against Egypt or the Egyptian regime, it also operates through a psychological mechanism of projection: the "plotting" and "planning" (*takhṭīṭ*) that ʿIsa finds behind rumors is a projection of his ideal conception of the self. What this case of combat reveals, then, is less the peculiarity of *ishāʿāt* than the interpretive style and anxieties of the analyst.

There are of course other events and phenomena that provoke the paranoid style of interpretation, such as riots, demonstrations, natural disasters, and disease. Rumor is one example among these, and as such, it serves to remind us that paranoia is not a general state or permanent outlook on the order of things, but is motivated by only certain occurrences, particularly those that infringe most immediately on the individual's notion of autonomy, or that reach a scale, mass, or velocity that are difficult to contain. Finally, while this paranoia may also be read into the rhetoric of the Free Officers I analyzed in Chapter 1, it is in ʿIsa's book, with its equal emphasis on the *takhṭīṭ* of modern development and the *takhṭīṭ* of rumors, that displays an abundance of linguistic, affective, and narrative symptoms of the mechanism of projection.

Noise against Development

A decade after the Revolutionary Tribunal had passed its verdicts, both the press and the film industry had been nationalized, and the military regime would seem to have tightened its grip over the principle sites of public discourse and the major avenues of dissent. In addition, the "groping about" and search for clarity that characterized the early years following the officers' seizure of power had by now found solutions in a boldly articulated ideology of Pan Arabism, grand projects of national development, and the towering figure of President Nasser. Victories, such as the nationalization of the Suez Canal, the building of the Aswan High Dam, and the final

expulsion of British forces, could now be paraded as the spectacular signs of the regime's effectiveness and legitimacy. The robust, unmediated agency invested in the state – its ability to mold both nature and society according to its carefully calculated designs – was articulated by intellectuals and ideologues in a language of *takhṭīṭ* or "Planning." There would be a *mukhaṭṭaṭ* ("Plan") to fight colonialism, a *mukhaṭṭaṭ* to build socialism, a *mukhaṭṭaṭ* to change the course of the Nile: a wedding of state power and legislative social science, such was the ideology of developmentalist modernity par excellence.

Carrying forward this ideology, Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa (b. 1925), a sociologist and regime apologist, would set forth to produce a ten-part book series entitled "The Socialist Citizen," printed by the regime's political party, the Arab Socialist Union. Coming at a time when Egypt was passing from "the stage of transformation" to "the stage of embarkment," the series was advertised as a "building block" in the further edification of society, and the construction of the good citizen.[42]   In other words, the time of revolution is re-envisioned as the time of *takhṭīṭ*. The books that would be published in this series bear out this general theme, with titles such as *Socialist Behavior for the Arab Citizen*, *Youth and National Work*, *the Socialist Leadership*, and *Public Service in Socialist Society*. But its very first installment, published in 1964, would be a book entitled *Rumors, and How We Can Confront Them* (*al-Shaʾiʿat wa kayfa Nuwagihuha* – henceforth *Confronting Rumors*).

Even if this book was commissioned by the Arab Socialist Union, we cannot assume that it ever held the attention of the country's leaders. Nevertheless, its significance lies in its situating of "rumor" as a problem – perhaps *the* problem – for the dominant ideological project of the day – *al-takhṭīṭ*. At least for Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa, rumor is the first object that needs to be tackled on the path to formulating a socialist society and a socialist citizen. Why should this

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[42] ʿIsa, M.T. (1964: back cover).

be so? What makes rumor such a privileged object of study, analysis, and "confrontation" (*muwāgaha*)? I will demonstrate how, in ʿIsa's text, rumors operate as a kind of "noise," interfering with the projects of developmentalism.

Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa begins with a definition of his object:

> Information or thoughts transmitted orally, or through unconventional means of communication such as the joke or newspaper cartoon. Its force is designed to effect an excitation in a person's thinking and imagination, such that he may come to see something that is not really there. This person will then add to it, making it spread and circulate more quickly. (7)

Rumors (*shāʾiʿāt*) are clearly something more than just "unconfirmed news." And while we have yet to arrive at any explicit reference to criminal activity, as was the case with Ahmad ʿAtiyyat Allah's "definition" in Chapter 1, it is evident that rumors are in a number of ways transgressive. They are false and falsifying, making one "see something that is not really there." They spread "quickly" through media defined as *ghayr maʾlūfa* – "unconventional" or "uncanny." Finally, although no reference is made to an author – only the manipulated transmitter who "adds to it" – there is a sense that the rumor is "designed" or "directed" (*tuwaggah*) from an unknown point of origin.

Significantly, ʿIsa gives only rather vague examples of actual rumors. Occasional reference is made to false reports about the prices or availability of unspecified commodities, insinuations about the "sincerity" of the government, speculation that Egypt is preparing for an offensive war, loose talk about the impending nationalization of unnamed companies, and news that so-and-so has been arrested or fled the country with his wealth. Such stories are no doubt important, but ʿIsa does not dwell on them. In part, this lack of detail could be understood as an astute recognition of rumor's contagious quality, as a text which gains greater force with every retelling – whether through report, analysis, or denial. Avoiding the contagious text would thus

deprive it of another host or site of infection. But I would also like to suggest that ʿIsa's

vagueness in this area relates to the fact that what matters in rumor is not only its content, but its

functional noise, its almost supernatural ability to frustrate and spread beyond the powers of the

state and social science.

Specifically, in *Confronting Rumors*, we are given an account of how *shāʾiʿāt* interfere

with the teleological project of developmentalism, what ʿIsa calls "Planning" or *al-takhṭīt*.

While society tends naturally towards change, "Planning" or the implementation of "the Plan"

(*al-mukhaṭṭaṭ*) pushes it towards certain "goals" more quickly, and the achievement of

"prosperity" for the "contemporary generations" (14). The results to-date are paraded throughout

the book in the ideological language of the day, and a veritable climax is reached with ʿIsa's

celebration of

> the revolutionary construction of the High Dam, which brought us our modern glories;
> and our revolutionary industrialization, in which Man asserted his control over Nature
> through faith, struggle and science, putting an end to the myth of our eternal submission
> to Nature's rule. (126)

And yet, the more the revolutionary leaders of Egypt seek to implement their Plan, this positive

change, the more they are met with the noise of rumors. As ʿIsa explains,

> If the citizens are unable to understand and appreciate the goals of Planned Change, so
> that they accept the transformations required by the path to prosperity, then they will
> become a suitable environment for the incubation and spread of rumors. Such a public,
> lacking in consciousness or unaccepting, is an obstacle in the path to social and economic
> growth… (41)

The public, according to the ideology of modern developmentalism, is an object to be acted

upon, but in this context, it is constantly pushing back with irreverent and frightening obstinacy.

As ʿIsa goes on to demonstrate, everywhere the government intervenes, rumors are popping up

like demons. Part of the work of development, for example, involves statistical research and "data collection" on the ages, health conditions, and other traits of the population; this "incites wide areas for the spread of rumors" (43). These rumors present "obstruction" and "impediment" to growth. Planned Change also requires, from time to time, the assistance of foreign experts, and new constraints to be placed on local technicians and scientists: here too do rumors "find conditions encouraging for their spread" (42). Moreover, the struggle to build socialism, and the fight against feudalism and other signs of social and economic backwardness, require a much greater number of legislative acts relative to more prosperous and developed societies. New laws on the registration of births, deaths, marriages, and divorces; laws governing credentials, degrees of expertise, inventions, scientific and literary production; and laws concerning religious minorities were all necessary for the success of the Plan, and the achievement of prosperity. "In this intensified legislative atmosphere," ʿIsa concludes, "rumors find fertile areas to spread and disseminate" (45).

These passages give a careful, and somewhat sanitized, account of noise. This is social science, after all, in spite of the colorful ideological language evident in parts. The text relies overwhelmingly on a dry analytic style, effecting an air of objectivity, neutrality, and precision by drawing on a quiver of earnest analytic verbs like *yuwaḍḍiḥ* ("clarifies"), *yubayyin* ("elucidates"), *yuḥaddid* ("determines"), and *yaʿriḍ* ("put forward"). A thicker description of the noise that ʿIsa attempts to contain can be found in Gamal al-Ghitani's novel *al-Zayni Barakat*, which I use here not as a literary text but as a social historical document. Al-Ghitani wrote this novel between 1970 and 1971. At one degree of reading, *al-Zayni Barakat* is a history of the rise and fall of Gamal Abdel Nasser, and thus covers the period during which Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa wrote *Confronting Rumors*. At one point in the novel, we read a private communique written by

al-Zayni Barakat, the Egyptian ruler who in many respects resembles Nasser. The communique

follows an incident in which al-Zayni Barakat had attempted to modernize Cairo with new street

lamps, a project which soon ran into strange resistance and had to be abandoned. Confiding to

the chief of Cairo's secret police, al-Zayni says:

> I have noticed the appearance of stories [*ḥikāyāt*] from time to time, circulating among
> the people, the purpose of which was to defame some important official, or to defame me
> personally. This is something that you will agree with me has to be combatted
> [*muqāwamatihi*] … For example, when I had wanted to light up Cairo with street
> lanterns, a lot of talk circulated about the matter, which was considered a great happening
> to be recorded in the books of history. I was thus forced to abandon what I had intended,
> what I had already begun. This did not anger me; what pained me greatly were these
> stories that were circulated on the tongues of the masses. For they love me, a fact which
> led me to believe that these stories and anecdotes had been concocted. (2005 [1971]: 154)

If Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa's text gives us a rather distanced account of rumor's noisy interference

with the projects of *al-takhṭīṭ*, this passage from Gamal al-Ghitani's novel provides a closer,

more personal reaction to the phenomenon. Al-Zayni's project − the installation of street

lanterns (*fawānīs*) − is precisely this modern developmentalist project of the 1960s: not only a

technological upgrade, but an ideological "enlightening" of Cairo (*inārat al-qāhira bi-l-fawānīs*).

It has been foiled by the noise of "stories," "anecdotes," and "talk." Not only has the "plan"

been derailed, but the leader himself is personally "pained" by the talk of the masses.[43]

Consequently, just as ʿIsa declares that rumors need to be "confronted" (*muwāgaha*), so does al-

Zayni demand that these stories be "combatted" (*muqāwama*). Moreover, the leader, like the

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[43] So it was rumored, too, that Nasser could often take personal offense at rumors and gossip in circulation. An anecdote to this effect is recounted by Sulayman Fayyad in his *Kitab al-Namima* (*The Book of Gossip*, 1996). He recalls a private meeting between his friend, the Lebanese author and publisher Suhayl Idris, and President Nasser. Led into the latter's "private quarters," Idris observed with a mixture of curiosity and dread that the president not only had installed a wall of radios tuned to every possible frequency on the planet, but also kept a full collection of his own literary journal *al-Adab* at his bedside (149). Nasser had taken offense at a poem he had read in the journal's latest issue, which he had banned from circulating in Egypt, and whose publisher he now had in front of him to offer some explanation. "This is what is said about me?!" Nasser reportedly exclaimed.

social scientist, is convinced that these stories are "concocted" by hidden agents – an important theme that I will return to in the next section of this chapter.

The kind of rumors recorded by both ʿIsa and al-Ghitani are a recurring feature in the history of both colonialism and postcolonial development. The intervention of technocratic experts and engineers with their strange equipment into local communities has often been met by popular anxieties, resistance, and "noise" expressed in the form of rumors. Vaccination campaigns, even in "modern" or "post-industrial" contexts, are an example of this dynamic.[44] Anthropological scholarship on African postcolonial states has also examined rumors that emerge as a response to the mystery, violence, and trauma that attends spectacular technological transformations, such as radio and television, or grand infrastructure projects like the building of roads (Larkin 2008; Masquelier 2002; White 2000). As Larkin has observed, "wonder, awe, and fear are affective responses common to the introduction of technology and mark the reactions of Europeans and Americans as much as they do Africans" (2008: 40). These affects are often expressed as fantastical rumors, which the agents of developmentalism – whether they are colonial authorities, or postcolonial regimes – blame for the popular rejection of their projects. So do the pages of *Confronting Rumors* record a flurry of *shāʾiʿāt* taunting the legislative voice of the regime at every opening. If we are not given many details of their content, it is apparent nonetheless that they are noise to the Plan, frustrating its telos of a regulated society, a socialist citizenry, and a nature subdued to technology.

The noise also interferes at an aesthetic and symbolic level, which can be detected in one of the few actual citations ʿIsa provides of the menace. Rumors, he says, are not only bare

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[44] For a recent example from Egypt, see the short documentary *Egypt's Campaign against Polio* (dir. Oliver Wilkins, 2005). Available at: http://vimeo.com/6596286. In the United States, rumors about vaccines that cause autism are also common.

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propositional statements, but can also lurk behind "unconventional" or "unfamiliar" forms (*asālīb ghayr maʾlūfa*). He provides as an example the following "popular song":

> *yā btāʿit il-bakht, shūfīli bakhti*
>
> O fortune teller, tell me my fortune
>
> *maʿadsh byigi, gara ēh ya khti!*
>
> He don't come no more, dang tootin'! (67)

What appears, on the surface, to be the prelude to a folksy popular song, may in fact be host to an insidious rumor. ʿIsa explains that while this song most obviously expresses the complaint of a woman about her absent beloved, its form may be exploited by a rumormonger to spread agitation and distress about the injustice committed by "social, political, and economic systems" – in other words, dissatisfaction with the government and its Plan.

But besides the obviously subversive content, I believe that this peculiar example has been targeted by ʿIsa for aesthetic reasons. The opening lines of the song exude the exiled signs of rural feminine churlishness, since not only is the narrator a woman, but her language is markedly "low" and "folksy." Against the high register prose of the social scientist, whose language is sanitized and cleansed of any obvious affective, emotional, or indulgent qualities, this musical dirge represents a kind of contamination or interference. Even while ʿIsa seeks to submit its excesses to the cold and rigid tools of analysis, it nonetheless strikes the reader as a jarring interruption in the book's dominant tone. In addition, the song's style and content together perform a symbolic subversion of developmentalism's tightly masculine themes. In the lines above, a complaint is lodged to the foreseer that "he" – perhaps a beloved, perhaps a brother or father – no longer "comes" – that is, he is absent (as is the name). More than this, the

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phrase "*maʿadsh byigi*" braces against the memory of the phrase "*maʿadsh byigīb*" – "he no longer *comes*" in the sexual sense; he is emasculated. The female narrator, too, is "castrated" – for she does not *see*, she asks the fortune teller to *see for* her "*shūfīlī*." If we conceive of ʿIsa's *takhṭīṭ* or "Planning" as not only robustly agentive, but also in a sense "masculine" – it is able to create, produce, plant the seeds of development – then its antithesis becomes associated with the feminine. Rumors, inasmuch as they interfere with the designs of the civilizing, masculine regime, are thus cast into a zone of rural femininity. The rumor-song encapsulates this anxiety of an emasculated self, a desiring self blocked by noise.

Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa's intricate discussion of the rumors' tricks and turns can help us understand the problem they presented to the regime as well as the social scientist. Naturally, as well as aesthetically and symbolically, they interfere with the developmentalist and totalitarian teleologies to which they have declared themselves committed. And yet, while ʿIsa would almost seem to recognize this noise as an almost natural response to the many interventions of the regime, or as arising from genuinely popular concerns and anxieties, this momentary recognition becomes systematically suppressed as he falls back on an interpretive scheme with which we are familiar: rumors are the result of a plot.

The Plot Theory: Rhetoric or Paranoia?

In a reading of rumors which he repeats in numerous forms throughout the book, ʿIsa argues:

> The war of rumors [can be understood as] nothing other than the desperate attempt of colonial and feudalist interests to regain their lost power … In the manufacturing and propagation of rumors, they have found an opening through which to launch their destructive thoughts. In the spread of rumors, they find an outlet for their hopes of returning to their bygone thrones. (25)

The faceless rumors that plague Egypt are not spontaneous eruptions of public talk, or popular reactions to unstable times. In *Confronting Rumors*, *al-shāʾiʿāt* are always mentioned alongside agents: *muṣammimū al-shāʾiʿāt* or "rumormongers" (literally "the designers of rumors"). Moreover, these designers are unequivocally identified in every case as agents of *al-mustaʿmir*, "the colonizer." If rumors appear to be random, chaotic, and beyond the natural, ʿIsa repeatedly assures the reader at every opportunity that they are in fact "organized and planned" (*munaẓẓama wa mukhaṭṭaṭa*; 50). "Rumor," he stresses, "is not a matter of mere unconscious eruptions; rather, it is the fruit of deeply rooted and carefully planned operations [*ʿamaliyyāt muḥkamat al-takhṭīṭ ʿamīqat al-gudhūr*]" (114).

Here there are clear echoes of the rhetoric deployed by Muhammad Naguib and Anwar Sadat, which I analyzed in Chapter 1. It is, in other words, what Morin and Kapferer had called the "plot theory." As I have argued above, following the sociological studies, the plot theory of rumor – claiming that it is the work of malicious, intentional agents – serves particular rhetorical functions: it simplifies a complex phenomenon, and "changes the image" of an erstwhile valuable social practice. We might accept this as the motive for Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa's claims as well: his book is deploying the common rhetorical trope of the "plot" to convince his readers that what appears to be spontaneous, grass-roots, and fairly innocent is in fact otherwise. Though the social scientist may in fact have his doubts about the ultimate source of rumors, and even dismiss in his own mind the figure of the colonialist mastermind as too simple an explanation for all the noise, what matters for him is the effect that these images have on an audience. The hope is that Egyptians, in the future, will think twice about passing on an unconfirmed report.

And yet, the very persistence of this trope makes one wonder if more than mere rhetoric is involved here. It is a persistence we see not just in *Confronting Rumors*, but official communiques, press conferences, newspaper articles, radio addresses and elsewhere: rumors are "planned," and they are coming from without (cf. Chapter 1). I find it necessary at this point to complicate the interpretation proposed by Morin and Kapferer, and to reconfigure the "plot theory" as the "paranoid style" of interpretation. The term was made famous by historian Richard Hofstadter, who used it to describe the interpretive practices of rightwing movements in the contemporary United States, and other groups in American history. The central tenet of the paranoid style is the belief in "a vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life" (1996: 29). Quite like the "colonizer" or "reactionary elements" of Naguib, Sadat, and now ʿIsa, the enemy as conceived by the paranoid style is "a perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman: sinister, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury-loving" (31-32). In contrast to the vast majority of the population, who remain passive victims, the enemy is "a free, active, demonic agent. He wills, indeed he manufactures, the mechanism of history itself, or deflects the normal course of history in an evil way" (32).

Hofstadter's work has proved generative for many scholars in history, political science, and anthropology, some of whom retain his term "paranoid style," while many others prefer terms like "conspiracy theory" (Bratich 2008; Marcus 1999; Stewart 1999) or "conspiracism" (Gray 2010). The choice of terms sometimes depends on how the phenomenon is conceptualized. "Conspiracy theory" or "conspiracism" is sometimes preferred to Hofstadter's "paranoid style" because the latter is accused of pathologizing the practice (eg. Bratich 2008: 4). I disagree with this assessment. Hofstadter was quite clear that by "paranoid style" he intended

not to diagnose a disease, but rather to appreciate a "style … much as a historian of art might speak of the baroque or the mannerist style" (1996: 4). This is quite consonant with Kathleen Stewart's conception of "conspiracy theory," which she argues is not "a prefabricated ideology (as if abstract, exegetical ideas were what ruled the world) but … a *practice*" (1999: 16; my emphasis). I retain Hofstadter's term "paranoid style," because for me "style" implies not a pathology, nor an ideology (a totalized matrix of ideas into which the subject is always already straight-jacketed), but what Stewart called a "practice" and what Hofstadter likened to an artistic style. That is, it manifests itself as a tendency or a disposition to interpret complex actions in a way that is paranoid. The subject (whether he is Sadat, Naguib, or ʿIsa) need not always be consumed by this practice, but pursues it rather in reaction to particular circumstances or a series of events.[45]

What interests me in ʿIsa's text is how it can help us understand the motives for the paranoid style. Why is it that the analyst, among other regime spokespeople, persists in his perception of a conspiracy behind rumors? Previous work on the paranoid style and conspiracy theory has offered several overlapping explanations for its prevalence. One that I have already considered is that conspiracy theory has important rhetorical functions – that is, as Morin and Kapferer argued about the "plot theory," it helps convince an audience of the threatening, foreign nature of a phenomenon like rumor. This argument is echoed by Gray (2010), who considers how certain authoritarian regimes act as "conspiracist rhetors," strategically deploying conspiracy theory to simplify a problem, distract attention from their own failings, and/or

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[45] I do not find it necessary to explain here that Stewart's notion of "practice," or any notion of "practice" in contemporary social theory, follows from Pierre Bourdieu's use of the term. Just as Stewart opposes "practice" to "ideology," so did Bourdieu famously oppose the "dispositions" of *habitus* to totalized systems of thought and action, such as Chomsky's early view of language. In a similar manner, I oppose a dispositional, occasional "style" to a paranoid pathology or ideology. Speculating further on the subject's ability to escape this disposition – his agency *vis-à-vis* the paranoid interpretive style – is beyond the scope of this chapter.

mobilize the public behind a particular policy. Writing on the Arab World, Gray also argues that

the prevalence of conspiracy theory in national political discourse is due in part to the *real*

history of conspiracies hatched against Arab countries by former or current colonial powers.

Even with the rolling back of European imperialism – which was an undeniable plot against the

peoples and governments of the world – the trauma of the experience has conditioned many to

read conspiracy as *the* motivator of political action. Nor has this foreign plotting ceased, with

the American military's wars on Iraq, Afghanistan, and its support of autocratic regimes in the

Gulf states, giving readers of current events every reason to suspect conspiracy. Long before the

current Western scholarship on conspiracy theory, Ihsan ʿAbd al-Quddus, our favorite

protagonist from Chapter 1, made this historical argument in an article published in 1978.

Entitled "Those who Escape to the World of Secrets," ʿAbd al-Quddus's article critiques what he

calls "the nature of Arab thought," which

> always searches for what is behind the curtain, what is between the lines, what is
> underneath the words, what is hidden inside hearts and minds. It never settles for what is
> presented before it or what it hears with its own ears. It always assumes that there is a
> secret agreement, or hidden motives, or a personal interest. (ʿAbd al-Quddus: 85)

This kind of thinking is not only Arab, he goes on to say, but pertains to "all generations who

have lived under the pressure of foreign dominance" (Ibid.). Conspiracy theory, in other words,

is a postcolonial problem. Of course, as Hofstadter demonstrated in his article, it is also a

Western problem; thus any attempt to pin the phenomenon down to a particular part of the world

will run into difficulties.

Conspiracy theory, or the paranoid style, may thus have rhetorical or historical motives.

Still other scholars, notably Marcus (1999) and Stewart (1999), emphasize the "pleasure"

inherent in the practice – an important aspect that I elaborate on in Chapter 8. In order to

appreciate the paranoid style in *Confronting Rumors*, however, it is important to recognize that there is not *one* paranoid style but many paranoid styles, whose principle claims, motives, and methods of presentation can be similar, but are not always the same. What precisely is the paranoid style as practiced by Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa? It rests on two claims, made simultaneously: first, rumors originate outside the conscious will of the public, in some "other" agency; and second, they are the product of deliberate "planning" (*takhṭīṭ*) – they are "planned" (*mukhaṭṭaṭa*) and "organized" (*munaẓẓama*), rather than spontaneous, accidental, or overdetermined. While both of these claims appear to be collapsed in the figure of the rumormonger, I find that greater clarity can be achieved by separating them in the analysis.

The first of these claims is manifest in the repeated portrayal of the public-at-large as passive victims to rumor, and the location of blame somewhere beyond their conscious will. ʿIsa's text is swarming with zombie-like citizens, automatons controlled by rumor. He calls them "sociopathic types," whose minds have been "taken over by a hidden mover, forced into a state of sedation similar to that which precedes a deep coma" (58). These possessed masses are likened to an animal "herd" (*qaṭīʿ*); they are "mere herd-like, unconscious crowds" (*mugarrad ḥushūd qaṭīʿiyya ghayr wāʿiya* (59). Why is the public not the agent of its own rumors? A clue is to be found in the passage from *al-Zayni Barakat*, cited above. "What pained me greatly," the Nasser-like patriarch says, "were these stories that were circulated on the tongues of the masses. *For they love me*, *a fact which led me to believe* that these stories and anecdotes had been concocted" (al-Ghitani 2005: 154; my emphasis). With his conviction that he and his people are one, and that he is acting in their interests, the developmentalist patriarch cannot imagine that the "stories" circulated against him and his projects could ever come from their conscious will. This conviction that the leader is beloved of his people, an emotional as well as ideological

conviction, leads him to the belief that the rumors are coming from without. Thus for Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa, the rumors that act against the projects of the state, the enlightened *takhṭīṭ*, cannot really be designed by the public.

If, on account of their anti-regime content, rumors point to an external origin, it is also on account of their manner of circulation that some "other" explanation has to be sought. This is one of the first observations that scholars often make when approaching the subject. "The rapidity with which rumors is propagated is astonishing," notes James Scott (1990: 144). Kapferer similarly remarks on the common perception that rumor has "magical circulatory virtues" (1990: 50). Both scholars explain this phenomenon in terms of the exponential logic of the chain letter: one person tells two, who tell four, who tell eight or more, and so forth. And yet, so often, the "magical circulatory virtues" of rumor would seem to point to some multi-tentacled phantom at work in the social body. Moreover, the sheer irascibility of the phenomenon, and the public's apparent unwillingness to stop talking, creates the impression of a zombie-like, "sociopathic herd" fully enslaved to a parasitic force.

The second of ʿIsa's claims – rumor is the product of conspiratorial designs – does not necessarily follow from the first. If the origins of the noise are somewhere outside the conscious will of the public, then the psychological and sociological dimensions to which he gestures could be pursued further, but they are not. Instead an image of a calculative, demonic agency is posited as the driving force behind the irruptions of rumor across the country. The first claim is not necessarily paranoid: rumor is a strangely complex phenomenon which, because of its velocity and analytic recalcitrance, suggests a range of different forces at work in the social body. But this range of forces is, at the moment of its discovery, immediately reduced by the analyst as he seizes upon the figure of the malicious plotter. Why has he made this decision?

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Having almost acknowledged a plurality of "other" factors, why has he so quickly proceeded to the second claim of a singular, intentional agent?

In his article on the paranoid style, Hofstadter offers a helpful hint when pointing out the apparent "paradox" that paranoid's enemy "seems to be on many counts a *projection* of the self" (1996: 32; my emphasis). Unfortunately, Hofstadter does not pursue this important insight much further, going only so far as to show how some conspiracy theorists have attempted to imitate their enemy in certain aspects such as the aesthetics of secret rituals, the obsession with evidence, and the use of subversive tactics. But what the paranoid projects from the self onto the enemy, I argue, is not just these secondary characteristics but the very idea of conspiratorial, direct and intentional agency. ʿIsa's text allows us to take this notion of projection further, since, as the reader will recall, it exerts as much effort asserting an ideal image of the self – the calculative, autonomous agency of the Plan – as it does an image of the enemy. It is not a coincidence that these two images are articulated in precisely the same language.

The practitioner of the paranoid style, in other words, *projects* the model of agency he holds most sacred, the only agency he understands, onto the enemy. This projection can be detected in the very language ʿIsa deploys. The *takhṭīt* ("planning"), *tanẓīm* ("organization"), and *tawgīh* ("directing") of the regime find their match in the *taṣmīm* ("design") of rumors, which are always *mukhaṭṭaṭa* ("planned"), *munaẓẓama* ("organized"), and *muwaggaha* ("directed"); the regime's policies of guided "growth" (*tanmiya*) are met by the enemy's "incubation" (*tafrīkh*) of rumors. Furthermore, the actions of both the regime and the rumor are understood through a network of metaphorical flows and blockages: the former seeks to install "the necessary [mental] obstacles" (*al-muʿawwiqāt al-ḍurūriyya*) in the masses, so that they become "rocks" incapable of being "swept away" (*tangarif*) by the flood of rumors; at the same

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time, rumors throw up their own "obstacles" (*taʿwīqāt*) and "blockage" (*ṣadd*) to the designs of development, which seeks to "dissolve" (*idhāba*) the corrupt sediments of colonialism and "melt away" (*tadhwīb*) class differences through its steady stream of consciousness-raising (150, 155). In the understanding of the paranoid social scientist, everything is the result of calculated design; finding the agent behind the noise is a matter of course, a matter of tracing the flows and rooting out the engineer behind the obstacles. To put it another way, the deep conviction which regime ideologues have in their own "Planning" inspires them also to believe a "plan" or "plot" is at work in the grand menace of rumors.

This "projection" is important not only as a sense-making device, but also as a sort of defense mechanism against admitting a more diffuse, distributed model of agency into the order of things. If the *takhṭīṭ* of rumors could be shown to be more complex and less rational, might not the *takhṭīṭ* of the regime also come under some suspicion? Were the Free Officers really free agents? Wasn't the Aswan High Dam – like all great projects claimed by the engineers of modern developmentalism – in fact the product of many different forces, of international cooperation, and quite a bit of luck (and even then, like rumor, somewhat leaky)? It is quite possible that the proclamation of *takhṭīṭ* as a fundamental property of all action, patriotic and treasonous, allowed Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa the convenience of having to look for another model – one that, taken seriously, would undermine the claims he made for the regime's modern victories, and the credit he gave to the calculative, plotting will of the country's leaders.

The paranoid style, then, is sustained in large part by an unshakeable conviction in a *takhṭīṭ*-centered notion of agency. What makes ʿIsa's interpretation of rumors "paranoid" is not necessarily its detection of hidden influences on the masses, but the reduction of these influences to an organized plan, whose control of said masses is total and without accident or failure.

Rather than investigate the multiplicity of forces, and even the failure of forces, that happen to congeal in any particular rumor, the analyst interprets the problem as simply and unproblematically as he would interpret himself. He does not abandon this interpretive ease because, in a sense, its abandonment would render his ideal self more complex and overdetermined, and indeed other-determined: the robust autonomy of the modern subject inundated by parasites.

Conclusion

Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa's *Confronting Rumors* is a singular text, and in many senses an isolated one: today it rests neglected in the archives, and ʿIsa himself remains virtually untraceable. Yet it encapsulates what was surely a more widely shared set of anxieties, and the interpretive practices deployed to contain them. In the early 1960s, an embattled but optimistic regime, struggling in the postcolonial era to prove its hegemony through a combination of physical strength and narrative craft, detected a strange resistance to its efforts. Things did not always go according to plan. As *Confronting Rumors* often painfully records, the reach of the regime was running into rumors at every instance of action, and the so-called "Planning" seemed to be swerving oddly off course. Even popular ballads, brackish jokes and simple tunes seemed to be pregnant with dangerous meaning, and possessed by an emasculating potential. All this noise called for an explanation, and social scientists like Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa were more than willing to rise to the occasion. In a sense, the explanation he provided had always been there: regime rhetors, since the very first days of the revolution, had made good efforts attributing *al-ishāʿa* to calculating, foreign agents. But were these efforts always conscious? Was the plot

theory only an attempt to convince the audience, or was it also an attempt, unconsciously, to uphold a conviction already held by the rhetors themselves?

Shifting the analytic emphasis from rhetoric to paranoia, I have attempted to discern the motives for the plot theory not in the conscious will, but in anxieties shared by social scientists and state actors caught up in an ideology of *takhṭīṭ*. Insights from the study of the paranoid style and conspiracy theory have led me to posit a mechanism of projection as a likely motivating force for Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa's repeated invocation of rumor's careful and calculated design. When his ideal of *takhṭīṭ* ran into noise, when the masses started behaving as rumor-zombies, the most convincing explanation was derived from his ideal model of agency, *takhṭīṭ*. Other examples could have been sought in the idioms of accident, happenchance, or a careful post-human tracing of "others" and their influence. But to pursue any of these alternatives would mean to acknowledge, at least implicitly, that there were problems with the regime's own enabling fiction of control. It would mean abandoning the credit taken for the building of the High Dam, the credit taken for expelling the British, the credit taken for building socialism. Surely all of these things had been achieved by deliberate planning, through the regime's exercise of its robust, autonomous agency in Egyptian, indeed natural, affairs.

"Rumor," Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa warned, "represents an imminent danger … no different from the danger presented by natural disasters or crises" (140). Certainly all these dangers could be explained in the same way. The paranoid style which I have analyzed here is much broader than my focus on rumors will allow, as it has also been deployed against disasters both natural and manmade. All of these phenomena can provoke an interpretive paranoia that fetishizes the calculative abilities of the responsible enemy. However, it is important to acknowledge the role of alternative interpretations, to avoid falling into generalizations about

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"conspiracy theory" and its relation to "the nature of Arab thought" (as Ihsan ʿAbd al-Quddus said). ʿAbd al-Quddus himself represents a skeptical alternative to the paranoid style in his critical article. If we are to locate a specific time and place for the kind of paranoia I have analyzed here, paranoia pure and unironic, surely it is within the confines of a regime, and a science, obsessed with calculation and control.

Chapter 3: All the President's Parasites: Contested Interpretations of the Mubarak Death Rumors (2007)

In June 2006, Egyptian parliamentarian Hisham Mustafa Khalil unveiled to the People's Assembly his plan to establish what he called "The National Authority to Combat Rumors" (*gihāz mukāfaḥat al-shāʾiʾāt*). In addition to penalizing any "manufacturer, propagator, or endorser of rumors" with a prison sentence of not more than a year, or fine not less than one thousand L.E., the legislation envisioned a council of "scientific experts" with the power to chase a rumor to its source, exterminate it, and respond to further public inquiries through a nationwide network of call centers. In defense of his plan, Khalil pointed to the recent outbreak of false news on the spread of bird flu, which had caused unnecessary panic across the country and led poultry farmers into ruin. To this he was able to add a list of rumors that had "struck" (*ḍarabat*) Egypt in recent years: reports on toxic cosmetics, the death of public officials, foreign espionage, terrorist plots, and contaminated drinking water, among other credible improbabilities. All this talk was damaging not only the public standing of individuals, but also, as the refrain goes, "the reputation of Egypt at home and abroad." The legislation was ultimately defeated: but was this because of protests from journalists and human rights groups, or because, as an official at the Ministry of Interior explained in a rare moment of candor, "any 'authority' to combat rumors would inevitably conflict with the duties already carried out by the security apparatuses and other agencies"?[46]

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[46] "Journalists Reject 'Combatting Rumors'". *Al-Masri Al-Yawm*, 6/16/2006, available at: http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=20211&IssueID=304. See also: "Hisham Beh, Ism Allah ʿAleh," *Al-Masri Al-Yawm*, 6/17/2006, available at: http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=20263&IssueID=305.

The latter is more likely – despite its rhetoric of rights and democratization, the Mubarak regime, even in the stupor and decay of its final decade, was careful not to make concessions to the advocates of free speech. And yet, Khalil's pet project, as a strategy of repression, could almost be said to belong to a different era. The regime imprisoned and tortured journalists, bloggers, publishers, and the rest, but this "National Authority to Combat Rumors," in its language, sense of purpose, and audacious scope and trajectory, seemed to resonate more with a time and place quite far removed from the present. What was this time and place? In what stratum of the social and political unconscious had Khalil's plan originally taken shape, from where had it gathered its mass, momentum, and meaning, only to burst forth as a sort of ideological hiccup in the twenty-first century? Put simply, where did he get the idea that "rumors" could be "combatted"? The previous two chapters have attempted to answer this question by tracing rumor's entrance and re-entrance onto the stage of public policy and social science. As a Trinity, as noise, as an undeniable conspiracy against the would-be conspiracy of modern development, *al-ishāʿa* featured prominently as an object of combat in the discourse of Muhammad Naguib, Anwar Sadat, Gamal Abdel Nasser (and al-Zayni Barakat), and Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa. It is surely to this discourse of combat and control that Hisham Mustafa Khalil's project properly belongs. But with the language of *takhṭīṭ* and "revolution" long since abandoned, and state developmentalism now a caricature of its former self, this new attempt to systematize the eradication of rumor simply did not resonate; it did not make sense, except as the efforts of an over-zealous regime lackey eager to prove his loyalty.

Nonetheless, the failure of Khalil's "National Authority" did not spell the end of "combatting rumors." Certain stories, woven around, or capable of provoking, deeply-seated anxieties in the political and symbolic order, do not fail to incur violent reactions from those

most heavily invested in this order. This chapter examines how regime representatives responded to the outbreak of rumors about the death of President Husni Mubarak in August and September of 2007. The political regime at this time adopted a laxer attitude towards subversive speech than either the Naguib or Nasser presidencies, and while "rumor" remained a quick and easy way to characterize unwanted criticism in press conferences and newspaper articles, the obsession which had grown around the object in the 1950s and 1960s had receded considerably – thus, the quick dismissal of Hisham Mustafa Khalil's proposed National Authority in 2006. Nonetheless, the anxieties that the Mubarak death rumors provoked, and the rhetoric and interpretive practices deployed against them, were remarkably similar to those analyzed in the previous two chapters. Through a reading of newspaper articles, blog posts, and government communiques during this period, I explain how the paranoid style suffuses the anti-rumor strategies of the regime, motivating its claims of conspiracy, its metaphorical language of parasites and demonic possession, and its dramatic prosecution of alleged "rumormonger" Ibrahim ʿIsa. I begin, however, with a recounting of the rumors themselves, in order to speculate on the anxieties and desires that gave them their special charge. At the same time, I argue, it is important to recognize the problems inherent in reductively psychological interpretations of rumor.

Rumor: "Mubarak is Dead"

> It started in the afternoon, around 3 o'clock, it's impossible to know the source with any precision … Of course, the details vary from person to person, but the content is always one, especially in grave events like this. Of course, this is not to deny individual talents, like the manner of recounting, or the style of reporting the news, or how it is divulged. Big Ben had not yet chimed 2 o'clock when everyone had already learned that His Excellency had suffered a "terrible accident." This is how it was described in the beginning; his private car had flipped over several times, and it seems that he suffered a serious injury…
> The whispering is first met with caution. Who knows? Maybe the news is false, maybe some unknown party broadcast this slanderous report as a sort of test balloon.
> At a certain point, a conviction grows that what is being circulated is not just idle imaginings, or rumors, but a true happening… (al-Ghitani 2002: 38)

In this scene from his novel *Tales of the Treasure Trove*, Gamal al-Ghitani captures the genesis and mutation of rumors after the sudden disappearance of a corporate executive. "His Excellency," as the executive is called, could be substituted for any corporate head, celebrity, or head of state, whose general veiling from public view is punctuated by conspicuous and unexplained absences, whether because of illness, death, accident, or retreat into luxury. In this case, the executive has reportedly succumbed to a traffic accident, and with details scarce, speculation and hearsay are rife. Al-Ghitani goes on to skim the surface of the rumors' psychology: "some are monitoring the situation, some are hoping, while not an insignificant number of employees exchanged glances of a special nature!" What is one to make of these popular whisperings? How to read the rumor? "Is this a prayer for His Excellency's survival? Or a prayer that what they had heard was correct, so that all would be relieved of His grip and odd behavior? Repressed feelings, forbidden from expressing themselves, looked out from people's eyes" (41). As always, rumor would seem to feed off a tangle of hope and anxiety, which could not be expressed otherwise.

I admit al-Ghitani's text here not to analyze its literary value, but to let it speak as a social and political commentary of great perspicacity. The particular state of confusion al-Ghitani describes could apply equally to events that occurred in Egyptian public life both before and after the novel's publication in 2002. Like the fictional "chief executive," President Husni Mubarak became more and more obscured from public view as his time in office stretched on impossibly towards a full quarter-century and beyond. Due to illness, repeated assassination attempts, vacation, or other reasons left unexplained, the president would sometimes disappear suddenly, leading to confusion and rumors such as those described in al-Ghitani's novel. One likely inspiration for the fictional scene was the thwarted attack by terrorists on Mubarak's motorcade in Addis Ababa in 1995. In the twenty-first century, several bouts of illness removed the president temporarily from television screens, most memorably in 2004, 2007, and 2010, and the script of the executive's disappearance and popular speculation repeated itself.

My concern here is with the discursive and epistemic quake of August and September, 2007, whose magnitude surpassed that of any of the previous Mubarak death-scares. At this time, beginning roughly in mid-August, rumors inundated the cafes, blogs, newspapers and sporting clubs of Cairo that President Husni Mubarak, then 79 years-old, was dead or seriously ill. Upon the eruption of the story, denials were issued in state media; First Lady Suzanne Mubarak appeared on television to threaten the nameless agents of false news; and the United States Embassy intervened with an unusual and unconvincing statement of innocence. But talk of the president's death continued unabated, fueled at once by the oblique hope of release from nearly thirty years of social and political malaise, and the often violently suppressed anxiety about an Egypt without Mubarak. Text messages and Twitter feeds nourished the rumor with

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more lurid details, including the nature of the president's illness and the advanced psychosis –

and perhaps sexual deviance – of his wife and son. The noise sounded something like this:

> "According to sources, [US] Ambassador Ricciardonne remarked at one point in the dinner that President Mubarak was 'sick,' and 'no longer the major political operator in Egypt'..."
> (*al-Badil* newspaper, 8/18/2007)

<div align="center">***</div>

> "Ambassador Ricciardone did not at any time – whether in public or in private – express worry about the health of President Mubarak..."
> (press release on US Embassy's website, 9/3/2007)

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> "My husband is fine..."
> (Suzanne Mubarak on *al-ʿArabiyya* television, 9/4/2007)

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> "The President in Egypt is a god and gods don't get sick. For this reason, the President and his entourage of sycophants conceal the truth about his illness..."
> (journalist Ibrahim ʿIsa in *al-Dustur*, 8/30/2007)

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> "In a separate case, the state security prosecutor-general charged [Ibrahim] ʿIsa with publishing reports 'likely to disturb public security and damage the public interest' following articles in Al-Dustur about President Mubarak's rumored health problems. ʿIsa was ordered to appear before the State Security Court on October 1..." (*Human Rights Watch* website, 9/14/2007)

<div align="center">***</div>

> "Adam was deceived by Satan, who rumored (*waswasa*) to him that the tree contained that which he desired, and so he ate from the tree, and was caste from Paradise because he had believed false testimony and concocted rumors..."
> (Shaykh Muhammad Tantawi, Grand Imam of al-Azhar, in state-owned newspaper *al-Ahram* 9/17/2007)

<div align="center">***</div>

> "...'I'm here talking to you and it's barely 8 in the morning!'..."

(President Mubarak [?], as quoted by a journalist interviewing him in the state-owned newspaper *al-Ahram*, 8/31/2007. He is "healthy" enough to be up and active at such an early hour.)

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The truth of the situation has never been revealed. Or rather, many "truths" have been revealed repeatedly, but they lack consistency. The president was not dead, but was he ill? Was he on vacation? Was he working as usual, spritely and energetic at "8 in the morning"? The answers provided by the regime and its allies exhibited panic, and were unconvincing to many consumers of mass media. The statement provided by the United States Embassy strikes the reader as almost absurd – this is because the strategy of entextualization, of repeating the rumor, is inherently risky. I will return to analyze the strategies of response and combat in the next section. Here I would like to speculate on the reasons for this rumor's emergence and spread.

Since the beginning of rumor's emergence as an object of analysis in the modern social and clinical sciences, psychology has persisted as the dominant interpretive paradigm. Especially when rumors appear, in the view of the analyst, to be fantastical or false, their authorship is alleged to originate in the depths of the unconscious. This psychological approach was made famous, but did not begin with Allport and Postman's *The Psychology of Rumor* (1947). To cite only one of many later examples, Edgar Morin's sociological investigation into rumors in the French town of Orléans is conceived, in part, as a journey into "the unexplored depths of the collective subconscious" (1971: 13). More recently, James Scott's study of subaltern forms of resistance has given many examples of how rumor "serves as a vehicle for anxieties and aspirations that may not be openly acknowledged by its propagators" (1990: 145). Especially in the colonial and postcolonial contexts that Scott investigates, "oppressed groups so often read in rumors promises of their imminent liberation" (147). It is not difficult to propose

such an interpretation of the Mubarak death rumors, which were undoubtedly fueled in part by the "anxieties and aspirations" of "oppressed groups" – the anxiety of an uncertain future, and the hope of deliverance from oppression. Interpretations of this sort proliferated in the Egyptian blogosphere and in the press, attempting to make sense of the phenomenon in a vernacular psychological idiom. In a post written on September 4, 2007, the Cairene blogger Bint Masriyya ("Egyptian Girl"), an occasional commentator on public events and personal diarist, produced a brief synthesis of these interpretations, proposing that the rumors were "the result of a schizophrenic frenzy as the result of a neural shock as a result of the feeling that *the man will finally kick it* and all will be well" (emphasis in the original).[47] The blogger goes on to add that people's "patience" (with the reign of Mubarak) has been exhausted, and exacerbated further by "the high price of sugar"; her own post was written "in a state of pre-breakfasting delirium." Whether this psycho-chemical chain reaction generates rumor directly, or whether it predisposes people to exaggerate a rumor already in circulation, it is evident that a kind of popular psychosis is invested with extraordinary explanatory power.

There are of course problems with the psychological approach to rumors. As cultural historian Luise White has observed,

> suggestions [in scholarship] of … collective psychoses [have] made rumors the speech of unified and homogeneous populations who [have] no multifaceted vision of the world; such interpretations [have] obscured the contradictory fragments of gossip that [are] made into any rumor. (2005: 243)

This is not to say that psychological or psychoanalytic explanations have no place in the study of rumor. Rather, the analytic crimes to be avoided when appealing to the unconscious (collective or otherwise) are reductionism, reification, and generalization. Not all consumers of mass media

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[47] Available at www.bentmasreya.net, 9/4/2007.

in Egypt played a role in the transmission of the Mubarak death rumors, let alone believe them. Nor does the analytic construct of the unconscious determine, as if it were an all-powerful author, the content and circulation of any rumor or fantastical narrative – such a proposition would be to fall back into a conspiratorial reading no different from the "plot theory," the only difference being in the figuration of the conspirator (the colonizer, or the unconscious).

At the very least, what I would like to emphasize here is that the psychological explanation of rumor is not a *neutral* explanation. Indeed as Neubauer has observed, psychological exegesis was among the most important rhetorical tools deployed by the journalists and scientists involved in the American "rumor clinics" during World War II. "Displaying a sophisticated talent for writing," says Neubauer, the rumor doctors spoke of "sexual inhibitions, suppressed fears and the mechanisms of psychological projection" in order to convince the American public that it was human, but also in a sense pathological, to believe false rumors (1999: 138). Psychologizing, and pathologizing, popular stories would thus be another rhetorical strategy to "change rumor's image" as Kapferer said. It is not surprising, then, that supporters of the regime deployed this strategy quite frequently in their response to the outbreak of the Mubarak death rumors.[48] So had Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa in his *Confronting Rumors* spoken in a psychologizing idiom when he portrayed large swathes of the Egyptian public as "sociopathic types" for having succumbed to rumor. So did Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, the Shaykh of al-Azhar, diagnose rumors as a malady afflicting "the naïve nations" (*al-umam al-sādhija*) which lack "consciousness" (*al-waʿy*) (2001: 8). In this way, rumor is reduced to an affliction of the mind, a disease with roots in the psyche, and other motives – such as political subversion, the personal rejection of the president, or ironic play – are brushed aside.

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[48] See, for example, Dr. Hasan Abu Talib, "al-Masriyun wa Qalaquhum al-Mashruʿ" ("Egyptians and their Legitimate Concern"), *al-Ahram*, 9/5/2007.

I will return to a closer reading of the Mubarak death rumors in Chapter 7, when I shift the emphasis from psychology to the aesthetics and politics of humor, parody, and play. For now, it is sufficient to observe the general context in which these stories emerged: an ageing, increasingly distant president whose lengthy reign was becoming more and more unbearable – in fact, rather boring – to ordinary citizens. In their attempt to control these rumors, representatives of the regimes resorted to psychology. They also, as I will demonstrate now, responded with their own psychosis.

Plotters, Parasites, and Ibrahim ʿIsa: Figuring and Refiguring the Rumormonger

Rumor has a tendency to inspire paranoia in the analyst. It creates an overwhelming impression that beyond it lies a sinister "other," that ordinary people are more its vessels than its agents. This may be due either to the strange content of rumors, or their almost supernatural velocity and recalcitrance. Shortly after the rumor of President Mubarak's death began circulating in late August, 2007, opinion pieces in *al-Ahram* and other pro-regime newspapers began their frantic search for its origin. Much like Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa's *Confronting Rumors*, many of these articles are marked by the conviction that the rumor has taken over the public from without – because of rumor's seditious, unpatriotic content, and because of what Kapferer called its apparent "magical circulatory virtues." More importantly, and also like ʿIsa, the authors of these articles held forth with the "paranoid" conviction that a singular, calculative agency was at root responsible. However, by considering more carefully the texts deployed by Shaykh Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi in this battle, I argue that the metaphors he uses to pin down the conspiratorial rumormonger are inherently unstable, and can be read not only as reductive, paranoid

interpretations of rumor *à la* Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa, but also as a more complex, richly literary understanding of the phenomenon.

In *al-Ahram*, a fairly typical account of rumor's otherness, and parasitic seizure of the social body, was provided on September 6 by Ilham Sharshar – one of the paper's staff writers, and wife of the infamous Minister of Interior Habib al-ʿAdli. Towing the regime's line of interpretation, Sharshar[49] begins by installing President Mubarak as the uncontested author of Egypt's past, present and future. The President "embodies the will of the nation, and symbolizes the extent of its cohesion and stability": that is, where ʿIsa had revolution-speak to assert the regime's work on behalf of the masses, Sharshar has the tropes of Mubarak's "accomplishments" and "gifts" to effect the unity of his interests with those of the people. These presuppositions, as we have seen, lead the regime's rumorologists to an inescapable conclusion: the recalcitrant text, frustrating the common interests of President and people, could only be the work of some outside force leaching on the social body. Sharshar calls out these archetypal and elusive *agents provocateurs*: behind the rumors are "an errant group" (*fiʾa ḍālla*), "a small gang" (*shirdhima qalīla*), "a bunch of no-names" (*asmāʾ maghūla*). Equipped with "fangs … sharper, more bitter, and more poisonous than we could have imagined," the alien rumormongers have torn open a "gaping wound" and caused a "painful flow of blood"; they are "wounding [President Mubarak's] long tradition of giving." Surpassing Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa's comparatively subdued language of social pathology and poisonous floods, Sharshar serves up a full and fleshy image of the parasite: the intruder who takes advantage of a host, and produces an unbearable noise.

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[49] The master of mock-etymology, the 17th-century anthropologist Yusuf al-Shirbini, defines *sharshar* as "female urine," opposite the masculine *ṭarṭar* (2005: 250).

More important than Sharshar's "othering" of the rumor is her fixation on the intentional, deliberately malicious nature of the rumormonger. The parasite here is not merely a spontaneous infection that has spread through a confluence of factors; rather, it is a fiend, consciously executing its peculiar agenda of destruction. In the previous chapter, I discussed this fixation with the rumormonger's plotting as a sort of "projection," by which the analyst projected his own ideal of agency onto the agent of rumor. Surely a similar process is at work here: regime agents like Ilham Sharshar understand action only in terms of intent and execution, of plan and its unproblematic realization. We are no longer in a time of *takhṭīṭ*, but the basic ideal of robust agency still appeals to all those obsessed with control. As such, a complex and overdetermined phenomenon like rumor is understood only in these terms, as the result of a deliberate plot. Yet it is clear in this case that the conviction regime representatives held in the presence of a conspiring rumormonger was triggered not only by an internal psychological process of projection. Faced with a specific rumor that posed an immediate threat to the political regime, they would also resort to the trope of the conspiring rumormonger out of rhetorical and practical concerns, similar to those I argued for in Chapter 1. Giving the rumor a face and an agenda – and, ultimately, a prison sentence – would be a symbolic way to contain the threat.

During these weeks of confusion, efforts were redoubled in the pro-regime press to produce the parasite in the flesh and give him a clear purpose. Most common were the accusations leveled at the American Ambassador, Francis Ricciardone, who had allegedly let word slip during a private dinner that President Mubarak looked "ill," and was "no longer the prime mover of politics in Egypt."[50] Ricciardone was a likely culprit not only for his representation of the most powerful "foreign interest" in Egypt, but also for his uncanny command of Egyptian colloquial Arabic; he denied the accusations repeatedly, choking on the

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[50] *al-Badil*, 8/17/2007.

word *ishāʿāt*.[51] Other accusations implicated nameless "external or foreign parties lying in wait"

(*aṭrāf khārigiyya aw agnabiyya mutarabbiṣa*).[52] Finally, the editor-in-chief of the pro-regime

periodical *Ruz al-Yusuf* declared that it was the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's largest opposition

organization, which was behind the *ishāʿāt* about Mubarak's health. According to Karam Gabr,

the organization possessed "27 centers across the nation, equipped with the latest instruments"

for the spreading of rumors; having already "spread 20 rumors this year, including rumors of

forced religious conversion," they were "preparing to circulate 500 more rumors."[53]

As with the Revolutionary Tribunal in 1953, real flesh-and-blood rumormongers needed

to be produced for all to see. On September 13, the editors of four opposition newspapers were

charged with "publishing false news, statements, or rumors likely to disturb public order."

Ibrahim ʿIsa of *al-Dustur*, Waʾil al-Ibrashi of *Sawt al-Umma*, ʿAdil Hammuda of *al-Fagr*, and

ʿAbd al-Halim Qandil of *al-Karama* were sentenced to a maximum year in prison and fined

twenty thousand L.E., later reduced.   Most prominent among these was Ibrahim ʿIsa, who for

many reasons was a very convenient scapegoat. Though his career in journalism began at the

state-owned periodical *Ruz al-Yusuf*, he was and remains more well-known for his loud stints on

a number of commercial television stations like Dream I and II, OTV and ONTV: his programs

were often cancelled or cut short by pressure from the Mubarak regime. His career in print

journalism has been no less dramatic. After the newspaper *al-Dustur*, where he worked as

editor-in-chief, was shut down in 1998 for alleged bias and incitement of public opinion, it began

anew in the twenty-first century and, while attracting some well-respected names like Fahmi

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[51] The English transcript is available at: http://egypt.usembassy.gov/ambassador/tr022808.html. He pronounced
ishāʿāt ("rumors") as *ishʿāʿāt*, "radiation."

[52] The remarks were made by the chameleonic politician and infamous conspiracy theorist Mustafa Bikri. Many of
the counter-revolutionary conspiracy theories that I discuss in Chapter 8 were also associated with Bikri. "Shaʾiʿat
Marad Mubarak Tujaddid al-Tasaʾulat hawl Khalifatihi" ("Rumors of Mubarak's Illness Renew Speculation about
his Successor"), al-Jazeera.net, 9/5/2007.

[53] Ibid.

Huwaydi and ʿImad Abu Ghazi, was unable to shake its image as something of a sensationalist rag. Through these sites of mass media, ʿIsa's boisterous presentation style, and his uninhibited and colloquial prose, cast him as an enduring thorn in the side of the Mubarak regime, and in this case, as a "rumormonger."

On the stage of national politics, Ibrahim ʿIsa would play a role similar to the one allotted to the Trinity of Rumors in 1953. And yet, this time, the performance was somewhat less convincing. The junta in 1953 could play judge, jury, and executioner, and had nearly total command of the show from the choice of venue, broadcast medium, and script, to the props, décor and lighting. It was still of course a matter of reception, and the directors had to brandish the threat of force for the audience to pretend to be amused. However, to make an egregious understatement, the public arena in 2007 was radically different from that in 1953, as was the relative involvement of the directors and the audience in the performance. From the moment the charges against ʿIsa were announced on September 4, newspapers and blogs outside the direct control of the regime succeeded in reframing the issue not as the trial of a rumormonger but as an assault on the freedom of the press. An issue of *al-Dustur* that contained speculation on the president's illness was removed from newspaper stands, but the "seditious" articles in question were circulated online by bloggers.[54] Even the newspaperman's interrogation by state security on September 5 was made publically available by The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), a human rights organization in Cairo. In stark contrast to the more apologetic tone adopted by the "Trinity" Nasif, Zahran, and Shahin in 1953, ʿIsa prevailed with his trademark irreverence, outperforming his interrogators on their own stage. Immediately disassociating himself from the myth of the phantom rumormonger – that is, rejecting the role he

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[54] Among these was an article by ʿIsa published on August 30, 2007, entitled "God's Don't Get Sick" ("al-ʾAliha la Tamrad").

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was meant to perform – he declared, "I published *about* the rumor; I am not a publisher *of* the rumor." His own commentary on Mubarak's illness, he claimed, was to reject the false reports of the president's death. Moreover, in doing so, he had used the same expression as the First Lady: "the President is in tip-top shape" (*zayy il-full*). Finally, his own newspaper had provided its own psychological analysis of the rumors, locating their origin on in the calculating mind of a conspirator but in the genuine anxieties of the public.[55]

If the staging of the Trinity of Rumors in 1953, carefully planned and buttressed with the threat of force, had been at least a modestly serious performance, the trial of Ibrahim ʿIsa, constructed in panic and taken over by actors both on and off stage, was transparently absurd. The alleged rumormonger himself would eventually be pardoned by the president. If state security, and the pro-regime voices in *al-Ahram* like Ilham Sharshar and others, had hoped to convince the public of their plot theory of rumor, they would be sorely disappointed. If they had been stricken with an acute paranoia about the presence of a sinister, all-powerful rumormonger operating behind the scenes, this paranoia was not shared by everyone else. The source of the rumor – or rather, the multiple agencies, influences, and contexts from which it emerged and gathered strength – managed to elude their grasp. Still their rhetorical and disciplinary labor did not cease. During as well as after the trial, pro-regime figures would continue to produce violent and polemical works of rumor combat in the press. Most significant among these were the texts of Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, whose metaphorical religious language held forth with the plot theory of rumor, while also undermining it in certain respects.

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[55] Even as he denied the role of phantom rumormonger, ʿIsa was also taking great relish in it. As I discuss in Chapter 7, his own discursive authority could be derived from his ability to project this figure of the hyper-influential, hyper-intelligent "yellow journalist."

Waswasa

Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi (1928-2010) was appointed by President Mubarak as Shaykh of al-Azhar Mosque and University in 1996, after having served nearly ten years as the Grand Mufti of Egypt. His tenure at al-Azhar was not quiet: as much a political figure as a religious scholar, he was often called upon to produce opinions favorable to state policy, and sent as an enthusiastic polemicist to the front lines in the regime's war against rumors. To make his claims in a religious language, however, would require a certain degree of figuration and, perhaps, distortion. The main reason for this is that the modern word for rumor itself – *al-ishāʿa* or *al-shāʾiʿa* – does not occur in this sense in the Quran. Rather, as I have discussed at length in the Introduction to this dissertation, pre-modern Islamic discourse provides other words and concepts like *al-namīma* ("gossip" or "calumny") and *al-ghayba* ("backbiting"), all of which have intentional agents. It is from these discursive wells that Tantawi needed to draw when engaging in rumor combat.

His first contribution to the campaign against the Mubarak death rumors of 2007 came during a sermon attended, it was said, by the President of the Republic himself. On Laylat al-Qadar – September 9, 2007 –Tantawi ascended the pulpit at al-Nur Mosque in Abbasiyya, Cairo to declare "80 lashes for the rumormongers!" in a widely criticized fatwa.[56] But if "rumormongering" as such (*tarwīg al-shāʾiʿāt*) does not appear in the Quran or Hadith, whence this penalty of 80 lashes? What Tantawi had done, in fact, was to adapt a religious sanction against slander – specifically, falsely accusing someone of adultery (*zinā*) or sodomy (*liwāṭ*) – to the rather different phenomenon of rumor. Through this conflation of religious and modern

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[56] "The Shaykh of al-Azhar Incites the President against Journalism, Calling for 80 Lashes," *al-Masri al-Yawm*, 9/10/2007. Available at http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=78843. "Fatwa" is often given more weight than it deserves in Western journalistic and pseudo-scholarly discourse; for a clearly articulated discussion of its multiple meanings, see Agrama (2010).

political discourse, Tantawi was thus delivering the plot theory: the reduction of rumor (a polymorphous, multidirectional chain of discourse) to slander (an accusation leveled by an identifiable agent at an identifiable target). Given a body to be lashed, the phenomenon could thus be combatted. At the same time, the anti-rumor fatwa could easily misfire. Was Tantawi saying that Mubarak had been accused of adultery and sodomy?[57] It was indeed quickly pointed out in the opposition press that the penalty of 80 lashes was grossly incongruent with the alleged actions of Ibrahim ʿIsa, and Tantawi quickly qualified that he had not intended to accuse any particular journalist, but was speaking generally about the crime of slander.[58]

The Shaykh's second attempt to interpret rumor came in the form of two articles published in *al-Ahram* on September 17 and 18. Entitled "False Rumors, and How Islam has Combatted Them" ("al-Ishaʿat al-Kadhiba wa kayfa Harabaha al-Islam"), the articles were excerpted from a book of the same name that Tantawi had published by the commercial publishing giant Dar al-Shuruq in 2001.[59] The overriding form of both the book and the articles is historical-religious allegory: a slow narrative procession, paved with long quotations from the Quran and Hadith, recounts the *ishāʿāt* cast around the prophets from Ibrahim to Muhammad. In this way, Tantawi continues with his reduction of rumor to slander, performed earlier in his fatwa. Every *ishāʿa* derives from a conspirator ("the infidels" or "enemies of truth") and is cast against a fixed target (a prophet). However, there is another reading of rumor, featured

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[57] Mubarak was so accused, at least obliquely, by Ibrahim ʿIsa himself in his 1999 novel *The Murder of the Big Man* (for which, see Chapter 7). An allusion to the president's latent sodomy (ʿIsa 2000 [1999]: 38), as well as accounts of his affairs with female news anchors, appear in the novel, though it is rather unlikely that Tantawi is bringing up old news amidst the death rumors in 2007. In early 2008, Husni Mubarak's English Wikipedia page was hacked, and peppered with references to his alleged homosexual affairs. During the Egyptian Revolution in 2011, graffiti on a police station in Alexandria declared that *Mubārak Khawal* ("Mubarak is a Faggot").

[58] Tantawi's response is available at: www.alarabiya.net/articles/2007/10/14/40344.html.

[59] My citations in this section refer to the book version. The book, in turn, had originally been published in *al-Ahram* as a series of thirty-three articles from September, 1999 to May, 2000.

prominently in Tantawi's book as well as his article of September 17, 2007, that I would like to analyze further. This is the rendering of *al-ishāʿa* as *waswasa*, the "whispering" of Satan.

"The first to have spread rumors," says Tantawi, "was Satan [*iblīs*] in his temptation of Adam!!" (9). The narrative unfolds:

> Satan tempted Adam with his Whispering [*waswasa*] and False Rumors [*al-ishāʿāt al-kādhiba*], saying: "O Adam, shall I lead you to the Tree whose fruit bestows immortality and authority that never withers nor wanes?" And Adam did obey Satan, and he did believe the rumors he told him [*mā ashāʿahu min ishāʿāt kādhiba*] about the Forbidden Tree, and he did fall under the influence of his Enemy. (13)

At a first degree of reading, this passage continues with the plot theory of rumor so beloved to regime rhetors. Satan takes over the role of agent from Ilham Sharshar's "parasite," Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa's "colonizer," or state security's "Ibrahim ʿIsa": in all cases, the rhetorical and psychological effect is the same. A complex web of agency and discourse is fixed in hypostases of good and evil, so that the former may claim a clear victory over the latter. More specifically, the prelapsarian setting grafts quite elegantly onto the dominant ideological landscape of contemporary Egypt, where President Mubarak figures as God and his rumormongering enemies, by default, figure as Satan and his minions. The product of a paranoid style of interpretation, Satan-as-conspirator is thus precisely the "free, active, demonic agent" described by Hofstadter in his article on conspiracy theory (1996: 32).

However, this first degree reading of Tantawi's text tells us what we already know: the regime rhetor is obsessed with the plot explanation. If we leave the robust figure of Satan in the background and concentrate more on the multiplicity inherent in the word *waswasa*, we can detect a more nuanced figuration of rumor. Demons and the demonic voice have often been championed by French and American postmodernists as expressions of plurality in discourse,

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textuality, and action, as opposed to the monological tyrannies of God and the Author. It is in this spirit that Roland Barthes, celebrating the intertextual, playful, and open "text" (in contrast to the filiated, singular, closed "work") declares its "motto" to be "the words of the man possessed by devils: 'My name is legion, for we are many' (Mark 5:9)" (Barthes 1989). The "plural or demonic" nature of the text, for Barthes, shifts the emphasis away from the intentions of an omnipotent author towards the multiple, contradictory, and ever-mutating web of different voices, authors, and readers. Thus *waswasa*, the demonic text, serves as a more faithful figuration of rumor than the authoritative, intentional Satan or plotter. Read this way, it allows us to avoid the knee-jerk, paranoid insistence on conscious authorship and appreciate instead the many different authorships and agencies, whether psychological, economic, human, non-human, discursive, or historical that feed into the rapacious plurality of the thing we call "rumor." Rumor, in other words, is not the work of *the* Devil, but the work of many demons and their *waswasa*: a duplicitous, duplicating word the repeats itself internally and externally. Rumor in this form, its nebulous and perhaps most common form, cannot be combatted, only negotiated with, entered into, and played with (cf. Chapters 7 and 8).

Waswasa, waswasa: Tantawi's word carries more than it knows; it is parasited. There is yet a third degree reading that it allows us to explore. In contemporary Arabic, *waswasa* becomes something more specific than the demonic voice. It is what we might call "finickiness" or obsessive-compulsive disorder: paranoia about small, unseen things, and the constant urge to keep clean. This is not just a modern colloquialism, for premodern Islamic thought also preserved this meaning. The religious scholar Ibn Qudama (1147-1223) articulates and extends this meaning in his polemical *Dhamm al-Muwaswisin wa al-Tahdhir min al-Waswasa* ("Condemnation of the Bedeviled and Precaution against the Whispering" – or perhaps

"Combatting Waswasa"). The "Bedeviled" (*al-muwaswisun*) are those who have succumbed to *waswasa*, and become frantic and finicky about matters of cleanliness, nutrition, and in particular religious ritual. Ibn Qudama, though himself a Hanbalite (often considered the "strictest" of Sunni Islam's juridical schools), considered religious fanatics – whom we might today call Salafists – to be "bedeviled," beset by *waswasa*. With this diagnosis in mind, we may understand how the most significant word deployed by Tantawi in his war on rumors turns against him, in a sense. What better description do we have of the "paranoid style" – this hyper vigilance against phantom others, the detection of danger in the most common and benign cultural and communicative forms, the overwhelming sense of confusion – than *waswasa*? On the way to diagnosing the threat, Tantawi has, at the same time, diagnosed the psychological style of the response. Regime representatives, the warriors against rumor, are "bedeviled," paranoid about hidden forces lurking in the dark.

Tantawi's texts are at one degree quite typical, and at another degree rather complex. They are typical because, in spite of their formal cloak of religious discourse, they share with previous acts of rumor combat a common analytic object, a familiar set of anxieties and frustrations, and a paranoid style of interpretation. The very word *ishāʿa* grafts Tantawi's articles onto the family tree of modern social science and social commentary,[60] and their title – "Rumors, and How Islam has Combatted Them" – places them as a sort of generic successor to Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa's *Rumors, and How we Can Confront Them* (1964). However, permitted a second degree of reading, these texts offer *waswasa* as an honest figuration of rumor, the complex, overdetermined social, psychological, and political phenomenon. The voice of many

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[60] Indeed when searching for an operative definition, Tantawi reaches not for the religious texts which otherwise dominate his study, but for a modern dictionary: *al-ishāʿa hiya al-khabar yantashir wa la tuthbat fīhi* ("Rumor is a piece of news which spreads, and whose truth is not ascertained"). He is precise in his attribution: "*al-Muʿjam al-Wasit*, part 1, pg. 503" (Tantawi: 8).

demons, *al-ishāʿa* cannot be pinned down on a single agent, a fact which makes it both incredibly interesting and terribly threatening.

Conclusion

> It has been said: Through the jinn's transmission of news, people have learned of the death of kings, and other important matters. This is how word got around in Basra, for example, about the death of the Caliph Mansur near Mecca. And there are many such cases.

> al-Jahiz (*Kitab al-Hayawan*, v. 6: 203.)

The Mesopotamian littérateur Abu ʿUthman ʿAmr ibn Bahr al-Jahiz (776-869) had an anecdote for every occasion, and he does not fail to provide one for this chapter. If his anecdotes appear as no more than delightful sugar lozenges wrapped in exquisitely woven rhymed-prose (*sajʿ*), more often than not, they encapsulate humanistic insights of extraordinary depth and durability. On the way to articulating our full argument, let us taste this one: Why do the jinn transmit news (rumors) of the death of kings? This has two parts: Why the jinn, and why the death of kings? The second part of the question concerns a recurring historical event of no great mystery: the death of the patriarch (king, caliph, or president) has always been a significant occurrence, and has often been presaged and prophesied by rumor. Readers may recall any number of examples from the texts of history and literature, from France in the eighteenth century (Farge 1991; 1994) and the twentieth century (Kapferer 1990), to the Soviet Union, to the Latin American *novela del dictador*, to President Mubarak. What concerns me in this section is the first part of the question: Why do jinn transmit rumor?

Rumor demands interpretation, and quite often, paranoia answers to the task. This may be due to the "magical" way in which it spreads, or its seditious content. The paranoid reaction

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is to impose on the phenomenon the figuration of a deliberate, malicious agency: it is the colonizer, the parasite, the Devil, or Ibrahim ʿIsa. A more sensitive reading of rumor's dynamics posits many different agencies at work. *Waswasa*, for example, is one figuration that goes beyond the reductive, conspiratorial reading of rumor. Jinn, in this case, would be another. It reflects a much more nuanced understanding of rumor's multiple, mysterious sources than that proposed by *the* colonizer or *the* Devil. For jinn can be both good and bad, and occur in many different forms. Their society is just as diverse, perhaps more diverse, than human society. As figures, they stand in for psychological factors, historical forces, and other influences on the emergence and spread of rumors. I would therefore argue that al-Jahiz (or his anonymous source) demonstrates an interpretation of *al-ishāʿa* that is more felicitous than the reductive strategies deployed by the combaters of rumor in postcolonial Egypt.

With this chapter, I conclude my investigation into the encounter between the Egyptian state and rumor in the postcolonial period. Whether under the sign of "confrontation" or "combat," the writers of authoritarianism in modern Egypt have intervened with systematic, and constantly troubled, strategies to read rumor, the recalcitrant text. However, it is important not to overstate the significance of my object, its perceived threat, or the panic it produces. What I have written here is not a history of a continual obsession on the part of the "state" or the "regime" with rumors, but an attempt, fragmented and incomplete, to locate the specific events and circumstances when rumor has become a problem, and how and why this has occurred. It is indeed a recurring problem, maybe a persistent one, and yet, with the exception of grand social dramas like the Revolutionary Tribunal of 1953, or the trial of Ibrahim ʿIsa in 2007, it has survived mostly on the paranoid fringes of power, in the dark and neglected corners of social scientists and religious polemicists. In the twentieth century, who was writing books on rumors?

Who was passing laws? In these chapters, we have seen obscure figures like Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa, or neglected works by more prominent individuals like Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi and Ilham Sharshar. Government hacks, like Hisham Mustafa Khalil, looking for a promotion or some sort of recognition, also showed great enthusiasm for the projects and technologies of rumor combat.

If I am to characterize the emergence and re-emergence of *al-ishāʿa* as an object of state discipline in twentieth-century Egypt, it is not accurate to speak of an uninterrupted sequence. Rather, it is better to propose a certain rhythm of ebbs and flows, of recessions and bursts, of dormancies and emergencies. At times, such as the early revolutionary period (1952-1954), rumor could shine brightly on the radar, figuring prominently in the symbolic and material work of regime-building. At other times, such as the mid-1960s, it might fester as a wound special to a class of scientific ideologues bent on controlling all aspects of nature, from rivers to human speech. It could also, in the early twenty-first century, appear as no more than a jester in the long-abandoned court of developmentalism, before unexpectedly taking a lunge at the man on the throne.

In the chapters of Part 1, I have concentrated on the *reactions* to rumor. I have largely removed myself from the messy business of analyzing rumors themselves – with the exception of brief speculation on the origins of the Mubarak death rumors – and the equally messy business of analyzing any real rumormongers. I hope to have shown why such analysis is "messy business": one always runs the risk of psychological reductionism, just as one can so easily fall back on the interpretive style of plots and paranoia. However, rumor is not just an abstract problem, whose attempts to understand and analyze it can be so easily dismissed. Hovering in the lofty position of meta-critique, one loses any real sense of a genuinely social, psychological, and political

phenomenon whose movements can be traced and – yes – whose agents can be made visible. Thus in Part 2, I proceed to take rumors – as well as rumormongers – more seriously as tangible things in the world. To do this, I take the somewhat counterintuitive step of moving to literature, in particular the novels of Gamal al-Ghitani. Literature is in many ways a more appropriate site for the study of rumor than the comparatively dry texts of traditional social science. This is due to the mobility and flexibility that fiction allows us in tracing a complex, shifting object of concern.

PART 2

THE LITERATURE OF NOISE: READING RUMOR IN GAMAL AL-GHITANI'S *TALES OF THE FOUNDATION* AND *TALES OF THE TREASURE TROVE*

> I've heard that Cairo is full of rumors, everyone is saying whatsoever he pleases, any person might start gossiping whether it's any of his business or not; some have demanded that Emir Tuman Beh, the Acting Viceroy, intervene to silence the tongues, others said that would be impossible, any break in the flow of news would mean that something terrible has happened, something we don't dare imagine; Is it possible that such an unimaginable thing might have happened? It's impossible … Matters here are uneasy, here in the coffeehouse a man adjusted his turban and asked, Have any of you seen Zayni Barakat since the other day? There descended a silence musty with caution … What has happened to Zayni Barakat? If nothing has happened, then what are all these rumors about him? (al-Ghitani 2005 [1971]: 8-9)

In this winding passage from *al-Zayni Barakat* (1971), the first novel and literary masterpiece of author and critic Gamal al-Ghitani (b. 1945), an Venetian explorer records the tense epistemic fog surrounding the whereabouts and wellbeing of Zayni Barakat, the Egyptian leader who has just gone off to war against the Ottomans. News is profuse, but is any of it true? The speculation goes on, snatching up other voices, perspectives, and literary genres into a narrative polyvocality that nearly throws the text, and the reader, off their spine. This is one scene, from one novel, dealing with a particular time (the earlier 16th century) and place (Cairo). But passages similar to this one may be pulled from almost any other novel or short story produced by al-Ghitani throughout his long literary career, as they constitute the narrative style that is distinctly his. Reading Gamal al-Ghitani, one is always navigating a careful weave of epistles, chronicles, newspaper clippings, stray thoughts, poetry, and, of course, rumors; truth and meaning, however, remain elusive.

This distinctive narrative style has not escaped notice. Many previous studies have examined al-Ghitani's mixing of voices as among the marks of a carefully cultivated intertextuality with works of premodern Arabic literature, such as the historiographical chronicles of Ibn Iyas (1448-1522), al-Maqrizi (1364-1442), and ʿAli Mubarak (1823-1893), that deployed similar techniques. Their frequent use of passive constructions when reporting news (e.g. *yuqāl ʾinna* – "it is said that" – or *yushāʿ ʾanna* – "it is rumored that"), and their variety of sources, are argued to have helped establish the "objectivity" or at least impartiality of the author in his coverage of historical events. By imitating this style, al-Ghitani, too, is able to establish impartiality when narrating events in his novels, especially when they come close to events in the real world (Draz 1981: 143; Mehrez 2005: 66-67). Multiplying his narrative sources, the author is also able to avoid personal responsibility for any encroachment on sensitive subjects. Scholars have also examined al-Ghitani's distinct style as resolutely "dialogic" (Mehrez 2005: 64; Al-Musawi 2003: 44) and "metafictional" (Azouqa 2011; Al-Musawi 2003: 265-272) – that is, it mixes and self-reflexively appropriates other genres in order to call attention to the constructedness of all narratives (history as well as literature), and to undermine official proclamations of a single truth. However, I claim, the proliferation of the formal symptoms of dialogism and polyvocality in al-Ghitani's work is motivated by more than these general (and already thoroughly argued) ontological and literary concerns. His narrative style is, in addition, a subjective and indeed very personal impression of the flow, fragmentation, and "noise" of public communications in postcolonial Egypt. In particular, it is al-Ghitani's concern with the spread and impact of *ishāʿāt* ("rumors") that can appropriately frame a close reading of many of his novels, including *Hikayat al-Muʾassasa* (*Tales of the Foundation*, 1997) and *Hikayat al-Khabiʾa* (*Tales of the Treasure Trove*, 2002).

Part 2 takes the rather unconventional move of turning to literature in order to analyze the social. It is not totally unconventional: studies of Arabic literature, in particular those of the Orientalist variety, have often stood accused of ransacking the fictional texts of distant "others" for reified ethnographic details, while ignoring the literary craft itself. In a recent interview with *The Kenyon Review*, novelist and critic Youssef Rakha decried what he called "Western interest in 'the Arab novel' as political commentary or anthropological source material," which "can only misrepresent contemporary Arabic literature and misread its context."[61] These concerns are valid, given the practice common among some scholars of scanning Arabic literary texts to discern prevalent "attitudes" or "opinions" on gender, sexuality, religion, etc., in "Arab society." Such a practice reduces the novel to a very thin opinion poll, itself a rather problematic, if not radically flawed, measure of the social.[62] This is to say nothing of the commercial use and abuse of Arabic literature to promote superficial notions of what constitutes "contemporary culture" in Egypt, Syria, Morocco, and so forth.

But ethnographic reductionism is only one rather peculiar mode of social knowledge which the reading of Arabic literature can produce. It is not "anthropological source material" – to borrow Rakha's derogatory phrase – that the novels of Gamal al-Ghitani allow us to hoard; rather, in this Part, I approach literature as a densely-woven medium that helps us register the complexity of a social (and political) phenomenon called rumor. Indeed it is for an understanding of complexity – or what is sometimes called mobility, fluidity, or freedom of movement – that many social scientists have recently turned to the study of literary texts. Bruno Latour, for example, has argued a similar point in his writings on Actor-Network-Theory, which he opposes to "wooden" forms of sociology responsible for reductive understandings of agency

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[61] The interview is available at: www.kenyonreview.org/conversation/youssef-rakha/.
[62] See Warner (2002: 71-72) on the problematic nature of polling as an analytic tool.

and subjectivity. "Novels, plays, and films from classical tragedy to comics," says Latour, "provide a vast playground to rehearse accounts of what makes us act" (2005: 54-55). He encourages social scientists to gain an appreciation of literature and literary theory, to read fiction and to write fiction, not because "literary theorists would know more than sociologists, but because the diversity of the worlds of fiction invented on paper allows enquirers to gain as much pliability and range as those they have to study in the real world" (Ibid: 55). Literature provides, in other words, a richer account of the social, a "thicker description" of the realm of human (and animal, and object) action, than many of traditional sociology's instruments of measurement. Practitioners of cultural studies – or for that matter, social scientists in general – should not shy away from literature. They should go deeper into it.

Literature in this sense is especially important in an attempt to trace the forms and deployments of rumor in the worlds of Egyptian public culture. It is a notoriously diffuse, recalcitrant phenomenon, which the combined powers of the modern state and social science have been unable to capture. Gamal al-Ghitani, perhaps more than any other author in modern Egypt, has registered in literature the vicissitudes and volume of public communications, epistemological confusion, and rumor in its sundry manifestations. It is therefore inevitable that I privilege his texts, among many others, in my study of the politics and aesthetics of this difficult cultural form. *Tales of the Foundation* and *Tales of the Treasure Trove* provide a rich site for tracing rumor as a political weapon, as the interplay of narratives and psychology, and as the effect of secrecy and seduction.

According to the author's colophon, the twin novels were written over a period of eleven years (1990-1996, and 1998-2001, respectively), yet they were most likely meant to be published

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as one book.[63] To my knowledge, they have not been the object of any critical attention, with the exception of Al-Musawi (2003: 302-305), who briefly discusses the first novel, and ʿAbd al-Qadir (2003: 145-183), whose review of both novels is brashly polemical, probably the result of a long standing feud with the author.[64] Like many of al-Ghitani's literary works, *Tales of the Foundation* (henceforth *T-I*) and *Tales of the Treasure Trove* (henceforth *T-II*) are in fact not designated with the generic classification *riwāya* ("novel"), but with another generic label drawn from Arabic literary heritage. In this case, as indicated in the books' titles, they are *ḥikāyāt* – a term I have translated as "tales," which may be understood in its broadest sense of popular oral narratives, as opposed to "higher" or more canonical forms, and which for medieval littérateurs like al-Jahiz (776-868) held connotations of mimicry and miming.[65] This is an apt description for *T-I* and *T-II*, which unfold as short and long narrative digressions, often anonymous or of contested attribution, about the power struggles within an unnamed "Foundation" (*al-muʾassasa*). The long-deceased "Founder" (*al-muʾassis*) whose presence haunts the two books is the object of nostalgic reverence for some, and a combination of negligence and apathy for those who have managed, or yet desire, to occupy his office through intrigue and corruption: they are mostly technocrats, bureaucrats, prostitutes, and freaks. These *ḥikāyāt*, then, are not only "tales" but also acts of comic mimicry in the medieval sense of the term, as the characters they treat come to us as obscured, distorted, and often grotesque caricatures of human beings. *T-I* and *T-II* may be interpreted most broadly as tales of the painful structural transformations endured by many "foundations" or "institutions" in the postcolonial world over the last sixty years, as the charisma and paternalism of nationalist leaders ("The Founder") gave way to the

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[63] Al-Ghitani underwent heart surgery in the period between the two novels, preventing him from writing them together.

[64] See also Mona Zaki's English translation of one chapter from *Tales of the Foundation* (which she translates as *The Stories of the Establishment*) in *Banipal*, Spring 2002.

[65] See "*Ḥikāya*." Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition. Brill Online , 2012.

senselessness of military rule, which was in turn undercut by the displacements and disparities brought by neoliberal globalization. Such structural changes have occurred at the level of the state – it might be said that *maṣr muʾassasa* ("Egypt is a foundation," i.e. too big to fail) – as well as at the level of the various organizations that in Egypt are called *muʾassasāt* ("foundations"), from publishing houses and charities to public and private corporations. More specifically, *T-I* and *T-II* may be read as narrative caricatures of institutions that Gamal al-Ghitani has himself inhabited and brushed up against, namely the Akhbar al-Yawm Foundation and the Ministry of Culture. As such, the tales present and perform a very intimate encounter with the myriad forms of rumor that have penetrated and propelled import scenes in cultural politics in modern Egypt.

Chapter 4: "It Still Makes Noise": The Rhetoric and Poetics of Rumor in *Tales of the Foundation*

Tales of the Foundation (*T-I*) begins with a nostalgic look back at the days of the Founder, whose legendary accomplishments are obscured by hints of a counter-narrative that seeps through in the form of terse whispers and accusations. The Founder had enemies. Some of these were political – we hear of his struggles during the "Totalitarian Period," and his animosity towards "the regime … even the country" (14) – while others were personal. And yet, "he knew how to pick his men" (53). Among his most dedicated employees, who respect his unwritten will and defend the Foundation against threats both external and internal, is ʿAtiyya Beh, *muṭliq al-shāʾiʿāt*, "the Rumormonger." The services he renders are among the many *ḥikāyāt* of the Foundation, and unfold over the course of the first half of *T-I*, before the noise-maker recedes into silent obscurity.

In this chapter, I take ʿAtiyya Beh as a locus for my investigation into the rhetoric and poetics of rumor. First, I seek to understand why and how rumor operates as a weapon, an act of discursive sabotage, deployed when more traditional means would seem less effective. Previous scholarship has considered rumor as a "tool of peasant insurgency" (Guha 1999) or a "weapon of the weak" (Scott 1990) valued for its ability to mobilize collective action against the dominant, while evading surveillance and punishment. Here, since ʿAtiyya Beh is part of a powerful foundation, it would be more appropriate to call rumor a weapon of the hidden: the particular tales he tells can only succeed in convincing the masses if the interested party behind them (the Foundation) is not revealed. Thus *al-ishāʿa* is an alternative to direct insult or open propaganda. It is also an alternative to truthful critique, for as ʿAtiyya Beh says, *il-ʿiyār illi ma-yṣibsh yidwish* – "if the bullet misses, it still makes noise," an Egyptian colloquial proverb he takes as his

slogan. In other words, a fantastical claim is more likely to have an impact – to make *dōsha* or "noise" – than a more accurate accusation. ʿAtiyya Beh has certain techniques for spreading these rumors, such as personal charisma, the manipulation of Cairo's traffic, and various modes of social crossing: these constitute what I call the "rhetoric" of rumormongering.

I then turn to an analysis of what Morin (1971) has called the *poésie fabuleuse* of rumors: their fantastical, almost incredible narrative content. Three of ʿAtiyya Beh's "loudest" rumors allow investigation into this *poésie fabuleuse*, which I will elucidate with important insights from Brunvand (1981), Farge and Revel (1991), Farge (1994), and White (2000, 2005). Each of these scholars calls attention to the ways in which rumors – though they may seem "incredible" to the discerning rational gaze – gain popular acceptance through their resonance with local narratives, anxieties, and historical experiences. Thus an investigation into this *poésie fabuleuse* will take us beyond the conspiratorial figure of the "rumormonger" to understand the contextual and intertextual webs from which fantastical tales emerge, attain credence, and make noise.

The Rhetoric of the Rumormonger

Like the novel's other major players, ʿAtiyya Beh secures his position through what is described as a "gift" (*mawhiba*) or "special ability" (*qudra nādira*) (66). Others gain prominence through their "special abilities" to craft slogans, seduce women, crack secret codes, or fix obsolete appliances; ʿAtiyya Beh's gift for "launching, formulating, and spreading rumors" (*iṭlāq al-shāʾiʿāt, ṣiyāghatihā wa tarwīgihā*) (67) is on par with these, though it is primarily for the Foundation, and not for his own interests, that he uses it. In this sense he is reminiscent of a character that appears in Gamal al-Ghitani's *Zayni Barakat*: a specially gifted "rumormonger" employed by the chief of the secret police (2005 [1971]: 93-94). But *Tales of the Foundation*

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reveals more details about the rhetoric of ʿAtiyya Beh, which, I argue, depends on at least two elements: 1) his sexual, cultural, and linguistic "crossings," and 2) his anonymity. Each of these deserves elaboration.

ʿAtiyya Beh is a crosser of many boundaries, the first of which are sexual. "ʿAtiyya" is a feminine noun, and although the name is not impossible for a man, it becomes conspicuous alongside his other signs of "effeminacy" which he adopts when chatting with women: pursing his lips, wiggling in his chair, now and then smacking his hands together then flashing his palms (152-153). There are, in addition, tawdry allusions made to ʿAtiyya's "love and inclination towards the men of the traffic police" (*ḥubbihi wa maylihi ilā rigāl al-murūr*) and the "need" he felt to visit them to "satisfy his desire" (*yuḍṭarr ilā al-nuzūl li-ishbāʿ raghbatihi*) (150). This language is an obvious flirtation with the stereotyped behavior of "sexually deviant" men, as reproduced in novels like ʿAlaʾ Al-Aswani's *The Yacoubian Building* (2002), for whom traffic cops are thought to be easy game. *Tales of the Foundation* does not, however, portray ʿAtiyya Beh as a "deviant." In a later scene in the novel, his "love" turns out to be for the profession itself, which he has secretly pursued as a hobby since his childhood. Standing in the middle of major intersections and taking lessons from the traffic officers, he would mimic their gestures, soaking in the unique bodily praxis that made them who they were: he confided in them, and they confided in him. But whatever the nature of his relationships, the reader does not miss the "sexual" undertones of "crossing" traffic.

Many previous studies of rumor, gossip, and loose talk have discussed their association in Western language and literature with women (e.g. Kapferer 1990: 98-99; Spacks 1986: 38-45). Eve Sedgwick also observed that "the precious, devalued arts of gossip [have been] immemorially associated in European thought with the servants, with effeminate and gay men,

with all women" (2008: 23). The association between loose talk and effeminacy – or subaltern status more generally – has just as much resonance in the classical Arabic tradition. These associations often arise from an imposed exclusion of gendered others from spaces and practices of normative sociality, and the resultant anxieties about these others' treachery and secret discursive power over the heteronormative, male ego. ʿAtiyya Beh, too, would seem to be tainted by such stereotypes. However, my argument here is that the rumormonger's ability to "cross" between genders is a crucial element in his rhetorical repertoire. He is in this way able to access different spaces of sociality, closed to less flexible types. The women in the Foundation – which the author presents mostly as shallow objects of the heterosexual male gaze – are elusive and just beyond the reach of ordinary employees, but they trust ʿAtiyya Beh as he tells stories and shares sensitive information. His relation to the traffic men – which, if not sexual, is certainly suffused with the most intimate patterns of homosociality – is probably more important, even if the novel does not make this connection explicit. Though this relationship is presented in a context separate from his rumormongering, it is easy to deduce how it helps augment his special ability: traffic police have supervision of Cairo's most important social arteries, in particular its several-thousand-strong fleet of taxis. A word dropped to one is a word dropped to all, certain to spread more quickly than through any other medium.[66] If one typically thinks of the Internet and text-messages as the most likely pathways for unconfirmed stories, it is arguable that the public transportation of the modern metropolis is more important. This gives new meaning to what Neubauer (1999: 52) has called the "autopoeisis" of rumors: not only do they create themselves spontaneously; they also, in this case, spread through "autos."

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[66] One need only read *Taxi* (2006) by Khalid al-Khumaysi. Taxis have also been the target of security crackdowns in Gaza, accused by Hamas of "spreading rumors": paltimes.net/details/news/130009/الشرطة-تؤدب-سائقي-الإشاعات.html.

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In a likewise manner, ʿAtiyya Beh is able to cross boundaries of culture, class, and language. The first part of his name, which means "gift," points to Egypt, called *hibat al-nīl* ("the Gift of the Nile"), a common trope in twentieth century Egyptian novels (one is reminded of Salwa Bakr's *Maqam ʿAtiyya* [2004], Khayri Shalabi's *Wakalat ʿAtiyya* [2008], or any number of character names like Bahiyya and Hiba): in other words, there is the aura of authenticity, of a character with roots firmly thrust into the soil of the nation. The name is born out in the total comfort with which he, though one of the Foundation's most prominent men, is able to sit with the "smallest employees," sharing their *nargila* and playing *tawla* (153). In all the company's public ceremonies, he is the glue that holds together, enables, and respects local custom: during funerals he discusses the uncomfortable but essential details of burial with the gravediggers; in weddings he pronounces knowledge of all costs and expenses both necessary and sufficient; he knows what gifts are to be sent to whom, and has congenial relations with sweetshop owners, tailors, and jewelers in popular quarters (152). Finally, he is able to negotiate with "local workers, especially small contractors, event organizers, undertakers, caterers, cleaning staff, buffet workers, and in particular those from Upper Egypt" (66). If these actions mark ʿAtiyya as culturally "local" and "low," he is at the same time comfortably identified with the "foreign" and the "high." *Beh*, the second part of his name, is an honorific title of Turkish progeny, once common in Egypt but now more evocative of the bygone era of the monarchy, and before them, the Ottomans. Every element of his person exudes the dignified perseverance of a faded nobility, from the Armenian suits he has tailored in a fashion "unknown since the forties" (71), to his concern for the proper deployment of prepositions and grammatical case endings. He is elegant, with a clean shave, and "redolent of an amber perfume, which he would purchase from an old druggist in Al-Hamzawi market, next to Barsibay Mosque" (154). Furthermore, ʿAtiyya

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Beh's cultural crossing is also a linguistic crossing. While he is painfully precise in his Arabic, it is revealed that he is in fact an expert in ancient languages. Before joining the Foundation, he began his professional life as an employee in the Ministry of Public Estates, deciphering old manuscripts and specializing in an obscure Ottoman script (71); he also had some command of Aramaic and Syriac, and Hieroglyphic and Cuneiform scripts (150).

Our rumormonger, then, is both authentically local and in touch with the wider world. He embodies both of the "storyteller" archetypes described by Walter Benjamin. As the first, he is the "resident tiller of the soil," the storyteller "who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions." As the second, he is the "trading seaman," who attracts listeners by his knowledge of things far away and unfamiliar (Benjamin 2006: 363). Each (ideal) type of storyteller, Benjamin tells us, was able to capture the attention and respect of an audience in his own special way. But ʿAtiyya Beh is more than ideal: playing both these roles, crossing between different realms of knowledge and sociability, he gathers up more potential vessels for rumor, and opens myriad pathways for its dissemination. Unlike Benjamin's storyteller, of course, he is engaged in a willful act of deception, rather than cultural edification. In addition, he is decidedly more discrete than either the storyteller or the newsman: his game is played in secret.

ʿAtiyya Beh's second rhetorical strategy is precisely this: his anonymity. While one can infer something of his movements from the above details scattered throughout the novel, one only actually gets a very brief glimpse of him in the act. It is said that he goes to the clubs and meeting places of the wealthy, visits the watering holes of journalists and chatterboxes. He goes to Nadi al-Jazira, the island club; to the Klub ʿAsri cafe in the proximity of al-Husayn; he goes to Hagg Ibrahim Nafiʿ's cafe in Giza (67). If he is at the Foundation, he sits in the coffeehouse, in

the same corner as the day laborers; he keeps their secrets: they trust, they know, that he will not inform on them (152-153). But this is all the reader sees: ʿAtiyya Beh remains, for the most part, a hidden agent. Previous scholars have suggested why anonymity is important for the transmission of rumor. Most often, it is asserted that anonymity or disguise is a means of protecting the transmitter from social rebuke or legal prosecution (e.g. Scott 1990: 142-145). Certainly, this is important for those like ʿAtiyya Beh who operate in a context of social and political authoritarianism. In a sense, though, this is less a conscious choice than the default position for all actors in a foundation (or country) where secrecy, and thus anonymity, pervades all levels of social and political action. Another function of anonymity is proposed by Guha, who connects it with the openness of the text:

> Being of unknown origin rumour is not impaled on a given meaning for good in the same way as a discourse with a pedigree often is … The aperture which [rumour] has built into it by virtue of anonymity permits its message to be contaminated by the subjectivity of each of its speakers and modified as often as any of them would want to embellish or amend it in the course of transmission. (1999: 261)

This does not mean that rumor is completely free to change; rather, as Guha argues, its core message is supplemented with minor variations. In this way, it is made relevant to different audiences, who may have slightly different standards of evaluation or ideological concerns. Anonymity, then, allows rumor to "broaden its range of address" (262) and circulate far and wide.

If for Guha, anonymity means the withdrawal of the powerful author, I would like to suggest that the reverse is also true: the hiding of the original author means the emergence of a more convincing one. ʿAtiyya Beh is not a public rhetor, performing a speech from a lit stage: the process is reversed, with his own person private and unseen, but the audience fully visible

and public, exposed to his words. Stepping aside, he allows anyone and everyone to play the role of the speaker. In the place of ʿAtiyya Beh, the rumor speaks as the voice of your neighbor, as the voice of the club, as the voice of someone close to you, the voice of someone you trust. For the formula of these rumors is not "ʿAtiyya Beh said…" – who would listen to this? who would care? – but rather "she said…" or "they are saying" or even "I heard it from Nasser himself…" The rumor now has the credence of a million voices, or of very important and credible voices, who are not in fact its source. The rumormonger is still there, of course, pulling the strings from off stage. This is why anonymity is important: if he did not retreat into the darkness, ʿAtiyya would be exposed and these attributions might become impossible. The paucity of detail surrounding his performance in the novel shows how well he has avoided the light.

The trick of anonymity in this sense can also help us understand the association between rumor and the Devil (cf. Chapter 3). Anonymous rumormongering is synonymous with *waswasa*, which Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi had defined as *al-ḥadīth al-khafī* (2001: 11), "subtle" or "hidden" speech. Iblis, in fact, is *al-waswās al-khannās*: the first word, *al-waswās* is the whisperer of *waswasa*; the second word reinforces the "hidden" or "unseen" aspect of the whisperer, and is often glossed as "the one who retreats." This is a slight reinterpretation of the term: traditionally, as in the *Tafsir* of al-Tabari (838–923), *al-khunūs* (the act of *al-khannās*) has been explained as the Devil's cowardly retreat from the mentioning of God's name (*alladhī yakhnis marra wa yuwaswis ukhra, wa innama yakhnis fīmā dhukira ʿind dhikr al-ʿabd rabbihi*). According to this tradition, then, *al-khunūs* comes after, and represents the ceasing of, *al-waswasa*. But if the Qur'anic Iblis is understood as this *diabolos*, this rumormonger launching his words from behind the scenes, one can see that *al-khunūs* is not the failure of his whispering,

but a necessary part of it. The devilish rumormonger needs to be *al-khannās*, to "step aside," for the success of his rumor: ʿAtiyya Beh cannot show his face. If he wants people to be convinced, he must hide his authorship, or at least his association with the Foundation, which commissions these rumors. Otherwise, the text could not acquire the authority of a million voices, or the voice of a disinterested party.

If we take seriously the preceding remarks on ʿAtiyya Beh's "gift," he would appear to be no less than a grand magician – indeed, the very conspiratorial rumormonger posited by the "paranoid" interpretive practice I examined in Chapter 2. Crossing borders, appearing to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time, he possesses the kind of fetishized agency valued by the likes of Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa and Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi. In *T-I* and *T-II*, this paranoia is not unreasonable, as robust agents are everywhere to be found, and nowhere to be seen: the Founder, *al-muʾassis*, for example, embodies this more than any other character in the novels. Moreover, rumors are everywhere in the Foundation, many of them malicious, so the concentration on a figure like ʿAtiyya Beh would be a quite reasonable exercise of the inquiring mind. However, having critiqued the fixation on the figure of the conspiratorial rumormonger, I believe it is important to shift the analysis towards the rumors themselves and the context for their emergence.

Poésie Fabuleuse

ʿAtiyya Beh has an impressive publications list: he is responsible for 1) a rumor that a hotel owned by the Foundation could magically ensure fertility, and conception of a male child, to wealthy guests; 2) a rumor that a competing corporation was spying on customers in their dressing rooms; and 3) a rumor that the Aswan High Dam, built by the regime which

nationalized and humiliated the Foundation in the 1960s, was fatally flawed and could flood Cairo to its rooftops at any moment (66-72). These are not just any *ishāʿāt*. Readers will recognize them as among the "classics," as it were – some of the most memorable Egyptian rumors of the last 60 years. A closer look at each of these texts seeks to elucidate the force of their *poésie fabuleuse.*

An enduring question in the study of rumors asks how and why belief in the fantastical and supernatural is able to persist in worlds of rational modernity. Edgar Morin, at the end of his detailed sociological study of girl-kidnapping rumors in 1960s France, expressed wonder at what he called "that fabulous poetic element" or *poésie fabuleuse* which still thrived across different classes and types of people in the town of Orléans (1971: 167). There it was being said (and apparently believed) that girls who entered Jewish-owned clothing stores were being sold into "white slavery" or otherwise sexually exploited. For Morin, the tenacity of these rumors had become "strange beyond belief" (16). Though the answer remained elusive, Morin suggested that the potency of these fabulous stories was due to a deep-seated "feminine anxiety" (176), local traditions of anti-Semitism, and the existence of similar kidnapping or slavery stories in local folklore. These suggestive remarks have been taken further by many other scholars, who have sought to explain this *poésie fabuleuse* not as the product of a conspiratorial rumormonger, or as simply reflecting the naïveté of the little people, but as the complex interplay of local narratives, historical experiences, and persistent anxieties. Ramsay, for example, places rumors in what he calls their "psychological and ideological setting" (1991: xvi) to understand what makes them "credible" (xxvii). The focus on the local narrative intertexts that give particular rumors their force has been adopted most productively by Farge and Revel (1991), Farge (1994),

and White (2000, 2005) in their studies of seventeenth-century France and (post)colonial East Africa, respectively. As White has persuasively argued,

> Circulating stories are not constructed on a moment-to-moment basis, they are drawn from a store of historical and contemporary allusions that have been alive and given new and renewed meanings by the fractious arguments of diverse social groups … [Such allusions] do not "explain" the rumor, but they explain how it was locally credible (2005: 244-245)

Both historians, Farge and White are employing methodologies very much in line with those of folklore. Brunvand, for example, interprets rumors and urban legends as the recent inflections of what he calls "proto-legends": "a virtual floating anthology of possible urban legends in the making" (1981: 175).[67] In other words, a "new" rumor makes sense because of its resonance with "older" cultural intertexts. In my analysis of ʿAtiyya Beh's rumors, I draw on these important insights, unraveling the culturally and historically resonant narratives and motifs – as well as anxieties – that ensure they make noise.

The first rumor spread by ʿAtiyya Beh came as a remedy to the Foundation's poor luck: having entered the hospitality and tourism market, one of its flagship hotels, located near Cairo's airport but far from any attractions, failed to win many customers. Soon, however, word broke out that any man and woman who engaged in sexual congress on the second and fourth floors of the hotel would conceive a male child. Reported cases were numerous, but one in particular stood out: a forty-seven year-old Swiss woman, "never having conceived," succeeded in bearing a healthy baby boy, and the event was heralded as a "miracle" (*muʿgiza*) (68). The bounty was great, it was (effectively) true, and guests from around the world began flocking to the hotel.

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[67] Brunvand continues: "While some [stories] are anonymous adaptations of older traditional motifs which come alive suddenly and briefly after years of inactivity, others may have a sustained local or regional popularity but never catch on with the general public, usually because they are too much the esoteric cultural possession of a particular ethnic or occupational group." (Ibid.)

Wealthy oil barons would fight to reserve a room, and multiple international airlines began printing the story in several European languages in their brochures. How can we read this rumor? A concordance of three resonant parts, I believe, lends the text its significance: the place or literal *topos* (international hotel); the theme of magic fertility; and the paradigmatic example (the "miraculous" Swiss woman).

First, *al-funduq* ("the hotel") approximates what Arlette Farge, in one of her many studies of rumors, refers to as a "highly symbolic place": a location that "lends itself particularly well to amplification."[68] Farge's example is a cemetery, which in 18th-century Paris was able to generate sundry myths, urban legends, and fantastical tales: "being situated in the middle of town, it was a significant link between the living and the dead, and within its walls it enclosed all the mysteries of religion and of life." The international hotel in Cairo at this time (let us suppose it to be the 1960s), while much less sublime and certainly less terrifying than the Parisian cemetery, was no less a locus of popular anxieties and fantasies, generating many genres of speculation. Caught up in the flows of world capital, the simulacra and spectacle of a tourist industry built largely on tacky reifications of Egypt's ancient cultural heritage, and thus resting (but hardly) in an odd balance between the local and the international, hotels of this sort were sprouting up everywhere. But for all their visibility, they were also nearly impenetrable. At once the playground for stars in many cinematic hits, the international hotel also reproduced architecturally the more widespread economic inequality: those it kept out were more than those it kept in. "What goes on inside the *funduq*" would become even for Gamal Al-Ghitani a topic of concern, as reflected in a previous short story of his entitled "What Happened to the Boy who Worked in the Hotel" (1995). The story, of a young man drawn into the underworld of the

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[68] I am paraphrasing the following from Farge (1994: 69): "Events which occurred in certain types of place lent themselves particularly well to amplification, for some places had power to dramatize events."

hospitality business, crystallizes fears about a parasitic neo-liberal order, the lost daughters of Western culture, and sodomite Gulf Arabs. The hotel shelters all of these images.

This "place" is also a natural store for the second element in this rumor, the theme of magical fertility. Hasan El-Shamy's encyclopedic studies of Arab and Egyptian folklore note "pregnancy induced by abnormal means" as a recurrent motif in many popular tales, jokes, and legends (2004: motif T.591.5). One should also note the resonance of this theme with the many medieval Arabic works of erotica, in particular Ibn Kamal Basha's *Rujuʿ al-Shaykh ila Sibahi* (*The Shaykh's Return to his Youth*, 16th century) and Shaykh Nafzawi's *The Perfumed Garden* (*al-Rawd al-ʿAtir fi Nuzhat al-Khatir*, 15th century), which appeared in many re-editions in the twentieth century. Like popular speculations about international hotels and cruise ships, the stories in these works may have not only satisfied a voyeuristic urge to see what cannot be seen, but also played on the lure of participation in the sundry pleasures committed behind high walls with hypostases of divine beauty. But in addition, the fertility of the hotel guests delivers something much more important in this case. For the Foundation, having made this poor investment in a hotel in the middle of nowhere, is facing the specter of its own impotence. Flooding its rooms with miraculous sexual energy, the *ishāʿa* launched by ʿAtiyya Beh in effect reaffirms the Foundation's ability to reproduce itself. The Founder himself is able to claim a robust autonomy of agency at a time when it could have been fatally threatened. We are reassured: "At that time," the anonymous narrator tells us, "The Founder's grip was firm, reaching everything" (68). This it must be, given the throngs of people competing over reservations. The Founder is pleased with his success, but needs to be firm, and for this reason he turns down bribes (or "expensive gifts") offered by "petro-princes" (read: wealthy men from Arab Gulf countries) who want expedited access to the hotel's magic rooms. With this rumor,

then, the Foundation not only reaffirms its own fertility, but the Founder is able to play an international game of biopolitics: he decides who can copulate, and who cannot. His "grip firm," he controls the very conditions for the possibility of reproduction.

Finally, the theme of fertility is instantiated by a very particular token: the Swiss woman who had seemed unable to give birth. The specificity of this image may yield a number of possibilities. It is noteworthy, to begin with, that the husband, partner, or lover is not mentioned: this raises at once the specter of adultery, common to the story cycle of sexual acts committed in monasteries, universities, lodges[69], cheap apartments, cemeteries[70], agricultural fields[71], or empty lots[72]. But if it summons a certain moral unease, and even panic, this absence of the male also seductively advertises the part to be filled. It offers, then, the promise of participation in the fantasy, with respect to two audiences. There is a specific interpolation of the Swiss (European or Western) female tourist, a call to play the part of the forlorn, uncontrollable woman-to-be-rescued so stereotyped in the kitsch and bravado of commercial films.[73] And there is the hailing of the wealthy hotel guest, perhaps local, meant to provide the seed of semiotic closure. Both positions advertised, and embodied, an act of signification is born: mortise and tenon. In addition, celebrity sex scandals in recent years have often allegedly taken place in such hotels, such as one involving actors Khalid Abu al-Naga and Nur al-Sharif in 2009, and one involving the actress Shirin Sayf Nasr and Saudi prince ʿAbd al-Aziz bin Ibrahim ʾAl Ibrahim in 1996 – the latter a year before the release of al-Ghitani's novel. In the final analysis, the scattered details of romance shed light into the international hotel, furnishing a place of anxiety and uncertainty with a familiar story and desirable script. Guests cannot help but come.

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[69] Shalabi, *Wakalat ʿAtiyya* (2008).
[70] Al-Wali, *Hikayat Shariʿ al-Bahr* (2005).
[71] Idris, "Abu al-Rijal" (2009).
[72] Cf. the Egyptian proverb, *tilāʾī il-ʿilʾ ma-tlaʾīsh il-kharāba, tilāʾī il-kharāba ma-tlāʾīsh il-ʿilʾ* (Rakha 2011: 326).
[73] Eg. *The Danish Experiment* (dir. Idris: 2003).

ʿAtiyya Beh's second rumor was actually a counter-rumor. We do not know the precise business of the Foundation, only that it is eager to create and recreate itself in as many ways as possible – having entered the hotel business, it has now sought a piece of the clothing industry, in both design and retail. Here it is credited with at least two innovations, which follow from its trademark combination of authenticity and pragmatism: in-home tailoring, so that customers can order from catalogues and still have well-fitting clothes; and the broadcast of Quranic recitation in the company's stores, to appease the growing wave of religious sentiment among customers. Competing clothing companies become jealous, and they spread rumors. It is said that the in-home service provided by the Foundation allows tailors to spy on the private quarters of customers. It is said that the Foundation's Qur'anic broadcasts are nothing but a cheap gimmick. It is said, even, that the Foundation is importing its cloth from the West, and after pressing against the skin of customers, it leaves imprinted there magnificently intricate signs of the cross (69). It is time for ʿAtiyya Beh to act: against these malicious bits of hearsay, he launches his own rumor. "Beware" (*iḥdharū*) these enemy companies, "with elegant stores and Western names," for they are more than they seem. Customers who enter their dressing rooms are being spied on. They are being filmed. Men undressing in private are being filmed, women undressing in private are being filmed, and somewhere, in the dark, company hands are busy editing the tapes to make it appear that the men and the women are in fact undressing together in compromising positions: it is pornography. Haven't you heard?

> It happened that a respectable businessman, who owns a leather goods company, went on travel to an Arab Gulf country. A friend of his there invited him to view a sex film: not a European one; it featured Arab women. From the very first shot, the man was stunned to realize that he was in front of his wife, the mother of his children. A horrendous shock, which sent him back on the first flight to Cairo. Until now, he hasn't confessed to the true reason that made him kill her, dice her up in small pieces, and pack her into empty

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containers of pineapple juice. Every day the papers are writing about the hidden motives for the crime, while the man himself seems unable to speak … and yet:
ʿAtiyya Beh knows… (70)

The impact of this rumor is achieved through a complex of four resonant parts. These include, first, the "place" (clothing stores); and then, three principle anxieties, each to be taken up in turn: exposure, incest, and dismemberment.

Little information is given to distinguish the competing companies' locations from the Foundation's own clothing stores: we know only the "innovations" introduced by the latter, and that the former have "Western names." Nonetheless, the significance of this *topos*, the "Western clothing store," as well as its resident emotive and cultural intonations, may be deduced broadly and impressionistically through a journey along the axis of association. The space inside – cramped and curtailed, even in newer stores, since the subtly-repressed archetype is always that of the closet or the bedroom – is certainly more accessible than the "international hotel." But as you enter, you are almost immediately alienated in a thousand different ways. Strangers follow you around, brushing against you, inspecting you: for they are trained to catch thieves, as much as potential customers. "Can I help you find something?" means "I am watching you" – it is in the training manual. You might not want to stay very long, but you *need* that coat, those shoes: in essence, just as you need to put something on before you leave the bedroom. But the items with which you would not hesitate to ornament yourself on a regular day are here objects of caution, even shame, and you are shy to ask these "others" to put them on your tab. In addition, there is, like the hotel, the prospect of sexual liaison: "Won't you pick out for me something pretty … like your pretty face?"[74] But it is also a place for families, where sex cannot happen.

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[74] Mahfuz, *Zuqaq al-Midaqq* (2009: 52).

Sex happens, still. These contradictions may be suppressed, but they emerge later in storied form.

In this place, the anxiety of "exposure" grafts itself onto objects, practices, and chambers. This is due in part to the alienation I have described: one is alienated from the labor of one's own dress. The objects you use to cover yourself are monopolized by others, and they can withhold them, they do withhold them, and threaten you with nudity. Moreover, the products in question are described as *malābis gāhiza* ("ready-made clothes") – not a totally arcane phrase, but one which nonetheless suggests a certain unfamiliarity, or touch of the new. They are thus objects whose consequences and possible metamorphoses have yet to be absorbed and mapped out in popular cognition – who knows, they might just fall off you at any moment, leaving you exposed because you are not accustomed to all the needles, buttons, and zippers you need to fasten, and which seem to be sprouting like dandelions in the newer brands. But the grand act of exposure here, of course, unfolds in the dressing room. This chamber reproduces and amplifies the anxieties I have associated with the clothing store as a whole. It is an uncomfortable mix of public and private, like elevators, mall restrooms, grocery store aisles, election booths: the voice of the Qur'an, and religious-themed stickers, speak in these places to chase out a number of scripts that might unfold. I think it likely that the terror of exposure, whether in dressing rooms or elsewhere, can be understood to derive in part from the basic fear of losing control over one's social and biological integrity to unseen forces. Walk into a dressing room and you will be possessed, and made to expose yourself. Go to the Foundation's stores and you regain your autonomy in bodily affairs.

The second anxiety captured in this rumor, "incest," appears when the "respectable businessman" views his wife in a sex tape. Certainly, it might seem inappropriate to label this

act of imagined intercourse between husband and wife as incestuous, but I believe that it is essentially such an act that lends this story its dread. Having left his wife in Cairo, and travelled to a foreign land to seek sexual gratification, the man has effectively cast her into a familiar, non-sexual role while casting the women of pornographic films as appropriate objects of desire and intercourse. (Indeed, the wife is referred to as "the mother of his children," which in one sense stresses not her child-bearing capacity but her motherly and domestic qualities: in other words, someone with whom he cannot appropriately have sex). In this unnamed "Arab Gulf country," the businessman is then "stunned" (*fūgiʾa*) and experiences a "horrendous shock" (*ṣadma muhawwila*) when he sees his wife. This terror, which the rumormonger wishes to instill in his audience, may be interpreted essentially as the terror of incest, as in the classical story of Oedipus. Travelling far and wide, the hero nonetheless has found himself in the end married to his own mother, just as this leather merchant has found himself inappropriately in an act of sexual desire with his "woman" (*imraʾa*: again, a word which effectively casts her out of the sexual realm of the "wife," or *zawga*, which is not the word used). Thus through its arousal of this classic theme of unintentional incest, the rumor provokes a deep-seated anxiety in its receivers.

"Dismemberment" is the ultimate fate of the woman who enters the dressing room. The rumor is paradigmatic, relating to a class of popular tales about gruesome murders, serial killers, and freak accidents that might unfold on the pages of tabloids like *Akhbar Al-Hawadith*. I believe this anxiety of dismemberment in ʿAtiyya's rumor can also be interpreted figuratively, on at least three levels. It is first, and most obviously, a "massacre" of the Foundation's enemies: those competing stores, and their customers, are to be destroyed in this industrial warfare. Second, it is the very practice of the apparel business taken to its logical extreme: for what is

tailoring but not "cutting up" the parts and patches of clothing, and putting them into storage? Finally, in "dismemberment" we have an accurate representation of the war of rumors itself. *ishāʿāt*, as consumers of national media have seen and heard so often, threaten to spread division in the social body: they lead to *tashayyuʿ*, the fracturing of the public into many *shiyaʿ* or competing factions. (Why pineapple juice containers? Perhaps because pineapples must also be "cut up" to be enjoyed).

These three anxieties – exposure, incest, and dismemberment – are compounded with the commonly perceived discomfort of "new clothing stores," giving this rumor its narrative punch. A sinewy composition playing on psychological, discursive, and historical chords, it reverberates across a tense theater of consumers who cannot help but get dressed in proper fashion.

The third and final of ʿAtiyya Beh's rumors that I will discuss – "the Aswan High Dam will blow" – is built on one principle theme: the deluge. This theme resonates powerfully with narrative and psychological complexes both local and global. Fears of an apocalyptic flood – often connected with the destruction of the Aswan High Dam, either as the result of an internal flaw or an air attack from Israel or other foreign powers – have persisted not only in popular superstition, but have seeped into a number of literary works. Gamal Al-Ghitani broached this theme himself in his very first short story, "The Papers of a Young Man who Lived a Thousand Years Ago" (1969). Presented as the memoires of a twentieth-century Egyptian youth rediscovered by archaeologists "a thousand years" in the future, the story registers the atmosphere of terror and *balbala* ("confusion") presiding in Egypt during a war with Israel. Amidst bits of radio static, scattered intertexts of Qur'anic verses and Pharaonic supplications, *tharthara* ("chatter") in the cafes, women gossiping, and even the rantings of a butcher with a speech impediment, the young man jots down this fear in his journal: "What would happen if the

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Aswan Dam came down??" (*mā alladhī yaḥduth law inhār sadd aswān??;* 8). In his first novel, *The Book of the Sultan's Seal* (2011), Yusuf Rakha's protagonist shouts the same question (*law ḥaṣal wi ḍarabū il-sadd il-ʿālī*), and gives us a gruesome answer pregnant with signification[75]; a play by ʿAli Salim (*Operation Noah*, 1974) stages a similar scene. But ʿAtiyya Beh's rumor is not just a local Egyptian phenomenon, but in fact flows from the most wide-spread (*shāʾiʿ*) story of all: the Myth of the Flood, which folklorists have identified in nearly every time and place, from Gilgamesh and Genesis to (now) Gamal Al-Ghitani. This is the most popular Egyptian rumor; it is also the most popular rumor of all time.

The eminent folklorist Alan Dundes (1988), building on the psychoanalytic work of Otto Rank, argued that the Flood is a "male creation myth." According to Dundes, the first act of creation in Genesis is by a woman: the dark waters of the universe are the waters of the womb; the first children are born to Eve. Seeing these waters, and the pregnancy of Eve – along with her bearing of children, which is accompanied by a release of hot fluids – man becomes jealous. Thus God, the male creator, feels compelled to unleash his own flood (on Nuh's or Noah's people), which destroys the woman's creation and allows him to lay claim to mankind. Similarly, ʿAtiyya Beh's rumor is launched in jealous revenge. During what elders in the novel disparagingly refer to as *al-ḥiqba al-shumūliyya* ("The Totalitarian Period," in other words the

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[75] "If they wiped out the High Dam in one strike, if it blew up and evaporated and Lake Nasser were opened up onto the Nile Valley – just imagine all that water kept up in storage – how long would it take before the Flood reached Cairo, before the Foundation and the Mugammaʿ and the Radio and Television Building turned up like sinking ships, before people found themselves splashing about and fighting with wild fish 'til their death! Would there be any signs of life above the water, or would we all just go once and for all? I see now gushes like mountains taking down the towers along the Cornice and the Circle Road with no effort, or more gentle flows carrying in their arches automobiles from Giza to al-Qanatir in one thrust, relieving the congestion and accumulating gasoline in their depths, until they sink. Cairo Tower, the Pyramids, and the Citadel swaying on silken surfaces wider than their base, and the entire stretch of the October Bridge a mere tongue bobbing up and sinking in the water that rages from desert to desert. And the asphalt now no more than another layer of floating filth…" (Rakha 2011: 447-448).

Rakha's description of the Flood, coming immediately after the protagonist Mustafa al-Shurbagi has left his pregnant wife, confirms the theory forwarded by Dundes that the myth of the flood is a jealous "male creation myth" (see Dundes, below).

presidency of Nasser), the Foundation had at first existed in a cool détente with the regime, only to be suddenly forced through a painful nationalization process – as Akhbar al-Yawm did under Nasser in 1960. ʿAtiyya's rumor thus is aimed in response at the regime's "grand accomplishment": this is its most visible meta-sign of legitimacy. The exploding of the High Dam is thus, on the one hand, a total destruction, both semiotic and material, of the Foundation's enemies (the regime); it is, on the other, an incredibly potent expression of its own desire for creation. It is significant too, then, that the Flood comes in Gamal al-Ghitani's first published story ("The Papers of a Young Man"): it is his loud burst onto the stage of creation.

These three texts together, I believe, are among the most resonant *ishāʿāt* of Egypt's mid-to-late-twentieth century. Their texture and impact derive from their storying up of the most contested sites and signs of modernity and the encroaching mechanisms of globalization. Hotels, clothing stores, and spectacular technological advances (like the High Dam) are *topoi* of seduction and repulsion, of hope and anxiety, and thus lend themselves to all manners of talk, speculation, and interpretation. To paraphrase White (2005), this does not "explain" the rumors, but it helps explain why they make noise. As ʿAtiyya Beh says, *il-ʿiyār illi mayṣibsh yidwish*, "if the bullet misses, it still makes noise" (72): here, I have understood the *dōsha* ("noise") as the feeding off the narrative and psychological threads of rumor's *poésie fabuleuse*.

Conclusion

As is befitting a noise-maker, ʿAtiyya Beh goes out with a bang. Disgruntled over the appointment of the Foundation's new president, he decides to make his position known on a hot summer day that would become seared in the memory of the city's inhabitants. In the middle of rush hour, everything came to a halt: we hear of Foundation employees grumbling in stalled cars; chauffeurs and taxi drivers suddenly becoming irate and speculative; and a train from Alexandria stuck on its tracks, with the air-conditioning bust and temperatures shooting up and passengers vomiting and passing out. It is the most complete traffic jam the city had ever known, stretching through every street, bridge, alleyway and crenellate. Motorists waited for hours until the truth emerged: "ʿAtiyya Beh is the reason!" (*ʿAtiyya Beh huwa al-sabab!*) He is responsible for what came to be known as *al-ziḥām al-mudabbar* ("The Planned/Masterminded Traffic Jam"). How had he managed? How he had managed: six discrete gestures, executed in a strict sequential manner, at an undisclosed traffic circle somewhere in the capital city, resulting in a complete urban paralysis. "Even the rumors and unconfirmed reports that usually circulate in such circumstances," a voice tells us, "had come to a stop" (142). This is a classic bit of urban folklore: a character in Mohammad Rabie's novel *The Year of the Dragon* (2012) refers to "the infamous Cairene intersection, which if blocked, would afflict the streets of Cairo with complete paralysis." ʿAtiyya Beh not only knows the spot, but he is the only one who knows which gestures, executed in proper order, will shut down the system. It is a secret he has learned from his sexual and textual crossings with the men of the traffic police; putting it to use, he blocks not only these crossings, but the flow of rumors that depends on them. It is a secret the police are unable to torture out of him: he is eventually released from prison, and severed officially from

the Foundation, but his friends are confident that the forces of law and order have not been able to make him speak.

I began this section with a thorough investigation into the strategies that constitute ʿAtiyya Beh's rhetoric of rumormongering. His "gift," I argued, depends on his uncanny ability to cross borders and spread himself, like rumor itself, through the major arteries of Cairene society. If gossip and its sisters have traditionally been cast as "other," I have argued that in *Tales of the Foundation*, ʿAtiyya Beh's intercourse with these others is a source of his strength. This is compounded by his discrete anonymity. While previous scholars have insisted on the significance of hiding the author of rumor, I have speculated that in addition, this hiding is what allows rumor to speak from many voices at once, reaching a level of persuasion unattainable by the exposed agent of the Foundation. In the second part of this section, I turned away from this conspiratorial image of the rumormonger to better understand the *poésie fabuleuse* or fantastic poetic nature of many *ishāʿāt*. But an additional qualification must be made about the readings I have proposed. Since rumor by its nature is widespread and given to mutation, its reduction to a single text misses much of its noise complexity as it circulates through many different people. Likewise, a single reading of a given rumor can only capture *some* of the psychological and narrative threads that give it meaning; I leave ʿAtiyya Beh's three rumors open to further interpretation.

Also, my turn to focus on the *poésie fabuleuse* of rumors in the second part of this section brings out a contrast that can be explored further. It is the contrast between an interpretive fixation on the author, and an interpretation that privileges the texts. In reading *Tales of the Foundation*, is one to believe that the genius of ʿAtiyya Beh is more responsible for these rumors, or the narrative and psychological dispositions of the audience? Who or what really

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makes the noise? My analysis has shown these rumors to be immanently part of the social fabric woven by many readers and writers of Egyptian business, shopping, and technology. They need not be dictates from behind the scenes; rather, they arise from genuinely popular anxieties and hopes about objects, practices, places, and futures of common attention. Moreover, such rumors are, if not universal, then certainly perennial or recurring, since they flow from a global pool of stories, myths, and literature. In the next section, I explore further the difficult issue of rumor's emergence, with attention to popular curiosity, anxieties, and the intersubjective dynamics of seduction.

Chapter 5: Secrecy, Seduction, and Speculation in *Tales of the Foundation* and *Tales of the Treasure Trove*

In his "Epistle on the Keeping of Secrets and Holding the Tongue," the Mesopotamian littérateur al-Jahiz (776-869) observes how frequently people delight in "spying for the news of kings, and publishing their faults, and sanctifying slander [about them]" (1987: 101). Through his martialing of anecdotes and masterful command of rhymed prose, he suggests that such behavior springs from "the general population's envy of kings, who are a gloomy sky to which their eyes are fixed, to which their hearts are attached, and to which their desires and fears are devoted" (1987: 100). According to this view, "kings" – or for that matter, any leadership class – are a looming, yet obscured, presence over their subjects. Together with the weather ("a gloomy sky"), they are the most observed, examined, and over-examined objects of common attention; like the weather, they naturally inspire all manner of speculation, prediction, and legend. This is not radically different from the relationship between the leaders of the Foundation and their employees. Throughout *Tales of the Foundation* (*T-I*) and *Tales of the Treasure Trove* (*T-II*), workers at all levels are held in suspense between the probable and the impossible, and are eagerly scanning for signs of the powers that will determine their fate, whether collectively or individually.

In this chapter, I analyze rumors that arise out of a popular curiosity about the figures associated with the "presidential floor," where the Foundation's current head has his office. The public, as al-Jahiz observed, might be perpetually curious about the powerful, but this curiosity, I argue, is aroused in a particular manner by secrecy, disappearance, seduction, and popular anxieties and aspirations, which generate rumors of singular potency. I begin this chapter by demonstrating how the frequent disappearances of the chief executive, which increase in number

with the onset of "the Age of Occultation" (*ʿaṣr al-khafāʾ*) – a label employees give to the epistemic fog that descends upon the Foundation – ignite popular anxieties, hopes, and fantasies about his life and death that find their expression in rumor. I then turn to a reading of the chief executive's female consorts, as well as the character named Fayruz Bahari, and develop a concept of "seduction" to explain the popular curiosity and rumors that are spun around them. I understand "seduction" to operate, following Baudrillard (1990), as the flickering oscillation of absence and presence, which draws a spectator towards an object.   Fayruz Bahari, for example, is surrounded in secrecy, and employees are expressly forbidden from monitoring his movements, but he also makes flashy appearances in the media and at festivals he personally designs. Fayruz thus seduces his spectators, and especially his powerful rivals, who desire to know and control him through the accumulation of bits of evidence and the fabrication of fantastical rumors. These rumors are also driven by pervasive fantasies and fears, shot through with a not unreasonable amount of "facts."

Secrecy and the Age of Occultation

> There is, in the Foundation, something that defies observation. Something that defies recording, and analysis. In spite of all the studies and analyses conducted by both Egyptians and foreigners, in spite of all they have been able to deduce, there is something that remains obscured from vision and comprehension, and from successive generations. Something that cannot be grasped through logic, and which has not been captured in poetry or prose.
> A secret?
> No. Secrets galore! (*T-I*: 78-79)

Secrecy would seem to be built into the Foundation, whose workings remain as obscure to us – "Egyptian and foreign" readers – as they do its own employees. Even in the days of the Founder, who was alternately praised and blamed for his openness – an oft-repeated scene has a stray

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worker walk in on him engaged in sexual congress with a female assistant – there was much that was kept behind the scenes. Anonymity, of course, was important for the success of ʿAtiyya Beh, just as it continues to be for characters like the "pimp" ʿAbd al-Namarsi, who hides himself so that his "customers" only pay attention to each other (*T-I*: 220). And yet, if the Foundation has always been engulfed in secrecy, it is the present time which anonymous voices declare to be the "Age of Occultation" (*ʿaṣr al-khafāʾ*) (*T-II*: 150). The Founder has long since passed, and his loyal companions, including ʿAtiyya Beh, have now faded into the background. The succession rituals that had once ensured the preservation of the Founder's work ethic and taste for authenticity have been abolished, and the Foundation is overrun by a younger class of professionals and technocrats whose business sense is decidedly neoliberal. Pensions are slashed, and hundreds of workers are declared redundant – and yet, little of this is given any explanation. The chief executive, the fourth since the passing of the Founder and known only as "His Excellency," retreats further into the revamped twelfth floor of the central building. A voice asks, "And wasn't His Excellency the first among those veiled from view [*al-muḥtajibīn*]? Who sees him? Who meets with him? We only hear about him" (*T-II*: 150).

Let us plumb the significance of this "Age of Occultation," this pervasive secrecy, before examining how it engenders rumors. It is first of all a time (*ʿaṣr* or "age"), beginning roughly with the ascension of the fourth chief executive. Players in the novel, and anonymous voices, have the occasional habit of declaring the Foundation to have gone through or entered into a certain "time," such as the "the Totalitarian Period" (*al-ʿaṣr al-shumūlī*; *T-I*: 8), another name for the Nasser administration; "the Time of Rears" (*zaman al-muʾakhkharāt*; *T-II*: 169), marked by the ascension of homosexuals and prostitutes; or "the Era of Gladiolus" (*ḥiqbat al-gladiyūs*; *T-II*: 104), named for the influence of a certain flower-woman. These are most likely instances of

phenomenological stock-taking, frames deployed to grasp a realignment in fundamental aspects of the world that require definition, evaluation, and response. Although temporally delimited in this way, it is not explicitly stated how this new "Occultation" differs from the secrecy that has prevailed since the Foundation's first days. Like everything else in *al-muʾassasa*, it is difficult to know whether this constitutes a radical difference, a difference of degree, or merely a continuation of the same state under a different name. A number of spectacular transformations, however, may be interpreted as reinforcing the occultation of major figures. These include the tightening of security procedures in the mail room (*T-I*: 232), the assignment of guards to "targeted" individuals (*T-II*: 82), and a complete redesign of the executive twelfth floor by a mysterious Korean company (*T-II*: 186; employees do not know if it is North or South Korea). In addition, "new managerial positions with obscure names and even obscurer duties" are in ascendance (*T-II*: 122). All of this results in age of *khafāʾ*, which I have translated as "occultation," but which also may be translated as "hiddenness," "secrecy," or even "invisibility." It implies the existence of something that cannot be seen, but which may still be sensed somehow.

The chief executive has always been an object of popular curiosity, given the power he yields over the fates of employees. But his occultation – in addition to several periods of more conspicuous absence, during which only his wife is said to know his precise whereabouts – injects this popular curiosity with worry, confusion, and sometimes bliss, and works fiendishly upon the employees' irritable imaginations. In one instance, the absence of the chief executive from his office fuels widespread speculation. It is said that there has been a terrorist attack on his automobile (39); it is said that shots had been fired from a '79 model Bijou (40); it is said, rather, that there had merely been a small explosion in the front end clip, and the car had veered

off into the sand. As the chain of rumor expands, it gathers up more details, trivia, and interpretations. The design of the chief executive's car – a black Mercedes – is built up and recounted with fine precision, its safety features are enumerated, and its singular ability to tickle the passions of avid voyeurs drives it into a side discussion on the perversions of certain employees. Descriptions of the wreck pile up, with some alleging damages and contortions so severe that no human could conceivably escape from them alive, and others rumoring that there had been so light an accident that the chief executive was able to walk himself to the nearest police station and file a report (41). The truth is never revealed, and when the official proclamation is made that the automobile had suffered only a minor problem, it is met with popular suspicion and more storytelling.

The novel contains heated moments like these, when the absence of the chief executive is sharp and conspicuous. But in fact every word about the chief executive that appears in the novel can in a sense be interpreted as a rumor: we do not know who is speaking, and we do not know if it is true, but it appears to be widely shared. Secrecy is imposed on all of his movements, and any and every detail that seeps out is contested and reworked by the audience. It is the Age of Occultation, and the chief executive, along with those closest to him, are referred to as *al-muḥtajibīn*, or "those veiled (from view)." It is a rather peculiar adjective, which al-Ghitani has explained in a recent interview to refer to Egyptian rulers who do not appear in public. He referred to a period discussed by Ibn Iyas, in which the Sultan disappeared and "the public became distressed" (*taqallaq al-nās min dhālik*; al-Ghitani's paraphrase). He added that the "disappearance" (*ghiyāb*) or "veiling" (*iḥtijāb*, the noun form of *muḥtajibīn*) of the head of state is dangerous, and not a "normal" phenomenon in modern Egyptian history.[76] In the

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[76] See al-Ghitani on *al-ʿAshira Masaʾan*, Dream TV, 10/2/2011. Available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKNjqRVTl8Y (from approx. 6:00).

interview, al-Ghitani was also referring to Field Marshall Husayn Tantawi, the head of SCAF, who was ostensibly in charge of Egypt since the Revolution of 25 January, but who rarely made public appearances. During the latter decades of the Mubarak regime – when *T-I* and *T-II* were written – the president could also be accurately described as *muḥtajib*.[77] According to this view, which al-Ghitani reproduced in his novel, the "distress" felt by the public at the occultation of a leader provides dangerous fuel for rumor.

The Seduction of Rumor

The occultation of powerful figures ignites people's concerns about their collective fate, and rumor is an expression of these concerns. However, it is not just disappearance, or absence, which fires the imagination. While the chief executive is hidden most of the time, other figures in the Foundation oscillate between appearance and disappearance, and in this way produce (seduce) a prurient desire for knowledge and possession. My operational understanding of "seduction" follows from ordinary language, and can be augmented by writings on the subject by the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard:

> Seduction does not consist of a simple appearance, nor a pure absence, but the eclipse of a presence. Its sole strategy is to be-there/not-there, and thereby produce a sort of flickering, a hypnotic mechanism that crystallizes attention outside all concern with meaning. Absence here seduces presence. (1990: 85)

In the Foundation, most of those who work, tarry in, or enjoy proximity to the executive twelfth floor are wrapped in *khafāʾ*, in secrecy, but also break through, often obliquely, to the public eye.

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[77] Anxieties about the *iḥtijāb* of the Egyptian leadership classes have also coincided with anxiety-laden rumors of the *taḥajjub* ("veiling"; from the same root as *iḥtijāb*) of many Egyptian and Lebanese actresses. The phenomenon has oscillated between panic and somber amusement in the tabloid press, having been read as a sign of Islamism's encroachment on the fiercely secular entertainment industry, or as the mid-age crises of celebrities regretful over their youthful profligacy.

In Baudrillard's words, they produce a "flickering" between "absence and presence"; they are not totally hidden, but revealed in flashes that "hypnotize." Whether or not it is a conscious "strategy," and whether or not its effect is to "crystallize attention outside all concern with meaning," the ostentatious disappearance (or discrete appearance) of certain figures seduces spectators with the prospect of hidden knowledge and value. It is the dominant preoccupation of the Foundation's employees, their irrepressible *engouement*, to access this hidden knowledge, these secrets, and this they manage through that speculative mixture of fact and fiction called rumor. What Patricia Meyer Spacks says about gossip applies here to speculative rumor:

> Surely everyone feels – although some suppress – the same prurient interest in others' privacies, what goes on behind closed doors. Poring over fragments of other people's lives, peering into their bedrooms when they don't know we're there, we thrill to the glamour and the power of secret knowledge, partly detoxified but also heightened by being shared … [This] excitement includes the heady experience of imaginative control: gossip claims other people's experience by interpreting it into story. (1985: 11)

Rumor offers the pleasure of penetrating behind the displays of secrecy to take hold of that which is hidden. It takes hold in both senses, as Spacks says: it is both comprehension and control of the object of speculation. This is one reason why Baudrillard likens seduction to the "challenge" of a duel, for the seduced tries also to seduce the seductress, each shifting between and denying the subject and object of desire in a way that taunts analysis. Rumor answers the challenge, it cannot resist.

In the Foundation, upwardly mobile women in particular seduce the curious, and are exploited as objects of speculation, with their bodies made into legible texts. This is captured in the expression "veiled nudity" (*al-ʿury al-mustatir*) that employees used to describe the Foundation's roving seductresses: it is precisely the eclipse of a presence (239).

The anonymous narrator traces the seduction of rumor in detail:

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In general, whisperings about women in the Foundation never cease, especially the beautiful ones … Some men hope and dream, whispering the most intimate of details about this or that woman, even going so far as to imagine their peculiar habits and customs, such as the quality of their moans … The women themselves are yet more curious than the men about the behavior of their female colleagues. In the seclusion and comfort of their private gatherings, they exchange such stories that the wicked authors of obscene literature would never imagine [*mā lā yataṣawwaruhu khayāl al-fussāq min aṣḥāb al-mujūn*].

There are other reasons for both men and women to monitor relationships, classify them, and follow their developments. For example, people want to know how close a person is to the powerful, whether someone has the ear of this or that big name, whether someone can whisper directly into the ear of the master of the twelfth floor. A person's proximity to His Excellency is a measure of this person's importance, and so imagine how significant it would be if whispering became touching and embrace! (*T-I*: 239-240)

Women and their movements are decoded as indicators of power shifts, in an environment where changes in management often come suddenly and without any explanation. The women themselves are mostly silent. Rumors of their sex lives promise employees not only a raw sexual pleasure, but also the fantasy of seducing and controlling those who seduce and control them. To support their fabulous stories, the men and women of the Foundation focus on the particulars, the small bits of exteriors that seem to point directly to interiors: "From her posture, from the pace of her steps, from the directions in which she glances … from all of this, it was not difficult to discern the extent of her relationship to His Excellency, and her most intimate affairs" (*T-I*: 300-301). The small details are then exaggerated and exchanged, and are mixed in with hopes and anxieties as they are woven into a plausible narrative. This is the *poésie fabuleuse* of rumor, glossed here as ultra-*mujūn* or "beyond the obscene/bacchic," and which, in accordance with the perennial stereotype, the narrator associates with women (even though the surviving *mujūn* literature was written by men). The knowledge manufactured in this way is not only fantastical, however, but pragmatic as well: it can be used to navigate the quickly shifting alignments of power and privilege within the Foundation.

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As readers, we cannot always tell if this knowledge is "true" (that is, if the rumored secret, such as a woman's hidden illness, is real), or if it is merely the fantasied possession of an over-zealous analyst. Some characters, it seems, are better than others at discerning secrets – or, they are more obsessed, more seduced by the challenge of penetrating surfaces. In *T-I*, we hear of al-Ashmuni, the Foundation's elderly concierge, who possesses a special "expertise" (*khibra*; 233) or "physiognomic acuity" (*firāsa*; 290) that allows him to detect the innermost essence of a passerby. The latter term bestows him with a mystic quality, common to characters in other novels by Gamal al-Ghitani that bear the flavor of medieval Sufi literature.[78] By observing the direction of glances, the pace of steps, facial features, and gestures (230), he can see, for example, "death encroaching" on certain employees (229). It is even reported that he was able to impress the Founder with his ability to deduce the contents of any envelope with a simple glance (233). In *T-II*, we hear of ʿAmm Sharaf, the Foundation's oldest and most skillful chauffeur, who possesses a comparable faculty of discernment based on sight and smell. He asserts, too, that he can "determine [by sight or smell] the degree of pleasure each man has experienced with his wife during intercourse!" (20). Al-Ashmuni and ʿAmm Sharaf, it seems, have taken speculation about secrets – a practice engaged more generally by all employees – and perfected it into an art. Moreover, as members of particular professions, they are well-positioned to apply this art. Al-Ashmuni's duty, as a concierge, is to watch and wait; ʿAmm Sharaf belongs to the fraternity of the Foundation's chauffeurs, who since the days of the Founder have been both valued and feared for their collection of secrets and rumors (*T-I*: 56). They are both, indeed, of a class with ʿAtiyya Beh, whose "special gift" was the mastery of a practice engaged to a lesser extent by many other members of the Foundation. Unlike ʿAtiyya Beh, however, the concierge

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[78] Cf. al-Ghitani's novel *Hatif al-Maghib* (2008), among many other works.

and the chauffeur do not deliberately launch malicious fictions; their art is one of speculation and discernment. This does not mean that the information they glean is any more factual.

Ultimately, I believe, it does not matter very much whether the information peddled by al-Ashmuni and ʿAmm Sharaf is "true" or "accurate." These two characters are important because they show in greater detail the practice of speculation that is (at)tempted, and highly valued, by many. This practice, I have argued, is seduced by the prospect of penetrating surfaces, obtaining secrets, and tightening one's grasp of the elusive figures of power. Some, it would seem, are more seduced than others, and are more eager to open the sealed envelope and capture a glimpse of the flickering, hypnotic celebrity. Depending on individual skill and acuity, the information they glean may be more or less accurate, and more or less suffused with the *poésie fabuleuse* of rumor. To gain a better understanding of the seduction of rumor, I will now turn to focus on one potent example: the rise and rise of Fayruz Bahari.

The Seduction of Fayruz Bahari

Who is Fayruz Bahari? His name first appears amidst much noise, as the latest in a series of secretive figures promoted to sensitive positions during the term of the fourth and current chief executive. In the middle of *Tales of the Treasure Trove* (*T-II*), he is appointed "Head of the *Fuyūḍāt* Sector": it is a nonsensical word, among the many new position titles that parody the illegible, disorienting signscape of the technocratic sublime. While *fuyūḍāt* lacks any meaning in Modern Standard Arabic, it is a derivation of the root *f-y-ḍ*, which denotes "excess," "abundance," "fluidity," or "flood." Quite appropriately, then, Fayruz is a figure that is always over the top, but also fluid in his seductive elusiveness: he can never quite be pinned down. Moreover, his position makes him responsible for the "Treasure Trove" of the second novel's

title. This is a labyrinthine vault of artifacts and artworks that are as priceless as they are

nameless, located beneath the ground floor of the Foundation's central building. The word in

Arabic is *al-khabīʾa*, which in Egypt has connotations of archaeological digs and Pharaonic

artifacts, but more generally implies something that is hidden, concealed, or kept secret. It is, in

other words, a localized metaphor for the seductive secrecy or *khafāʾ* that pervades the entire

Foundation. Thus Fayruz naturally seduces popular speculation about the treasures he is charged

with protecting; however, it is his own personal secrets that fuel the rumors I analyze here.

It begins with an act of speculation, and a reading of surfaces. Fayruz, it is observed, is

"fluent in several languages; handsome; a bachelor despite his nearing fifty; of refined

composure; foppish" (*T-II*: 150). These qualities, the anonymous narrator conjectures, were

most likely what gave rise to

> the rumor which quickly broke out and spread from corporate headquarters to all the
> various branches, and to all the administrations and organizations and clubs associated
> with the Foundation. Within minutes, the affair had reached the coffeehouses and clubs
> and salons and meeting places, into the furthest and most isolated neighborhoods, from
> the established areas to the slums. All this baffled the rumor experts in State Security...
> A single sentence, nearly uniform in content, was whispered and pronounced in secret
> and in the open: "There's a sodomite [*lūṭī*] in the new administration." (150-151)

In this passage, the author captures so well the "magical circulatory virtues" or rumor. Its

precise origin is unknown, and its uncanny velocity escapes even the rationalizing instruments of

the state. Indeed, the next several pages spend as much time describing the rumor's spread as

they do its content. "After the news was passed around from mouth to mouth, the details began

to spread, and truth mixed with fabrication" (151). Next we hear that the rumor

> spread with a speed that astonished everyone. The interested organizations passed it
> around, as well as their branches in major cities and distant villages, all of which
> perplexed the experts at the Center for Political and Strategic Studies. Government

bodies took an interest, as did subordinate groups. It was followed closely by foreign reporters and correspondents, as well as those called "observers" in the news, and agents from foreign and regional intelligence agencies. A statement was released in Helsinki, from an organization calling for the legalization of same-sex marriage, in support of "the important step taken by an Eastern foundation." It was also rumored that a photograph had been published, depicting Fayruz participating in a peaceful march for sexual deviants in the streets of New York … some swore that they had seen the photograph, but this was not verified…
The BBC Arabic service broadcast an item.
Truly
For certain, I heard it with my very own ears. (153)

The length taken to map the circulation of this rumor surely makes it one of the "noisiest" in the two novels. At the international level, it seems to draw its force from hopes, perhaps voyeuristic desires, of a sexually legible or accessible Orient. Within the Foundation, however, it draws on and inspires a mix of confusion, pleasure, anxiety, and panic. To understand the unique potency of the rumor of Fayruz Bahari's sexuality, I will analyze the general psychological elements it stimulates, before examining how specific individuals in the Foundation are seduced by Fayruz into the rumor's psychological and epistemological vortex.

The rumor is fueled by one principle structure of feeling, which may not inappropriately be rendered as "homosexual panic." Literary scholar Eve Sedgwick's writings on the topic are the most well-known, and may be taken as generally instructive. While "homosexual panic" has been deployed, in the United States beginning in the early twentieth century, as a legal defense for accused murderers of homosexual men, Sedgwick's "theft" of the term is intended to explore the emotive, psychological, and political dimensions between men in English literature and society (2008: 20-21). It is conceived not as individual psychopathology, but as a structural principle that renders nearly all men fearful of the implication of homosexual relationships, whether as paranoia about one's one latent homosexuality, or the fear of being taken advantage of by other homosexuals. Sedgwick historicizes this panic, situating its emergence in the middle

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of the nineteenth century, when it became "an endemic and ineradicable state" for men, specifically those in high-powered professional settings (2008: 185). While the panic studied by Sedgwick, no less than the word "homosexual" itself, may be the object of such analysis that rightly aims for a degree of historical and cultural specificity, I will suggest tentatively that the term "homosexual panic" is not an inaccurate description of the anxieties which the reader encounters in *Tales of the Treasure Trove*. This is not only for the sake of terminological convenience, but because I believe it is neither productive nor seductive to imagine homophobia or homosexual panic as so peculiarly a "Western" or "postcolonial" discursive construct that the rest of the world becomes sloughed off into a bin of incomprehensible alterity. The anxiety I wish to describe can best be determined by turning to the text itself.

Scattered signs of homosexual panic erupt at random points throughout *T-I* and *T-II* even before the appearance of Fayruz Bahari, and can be read as the semiotic foreshocks of the rumor proper. The chief executive himself is an early conduit for these signs. It is said that His Excellency had the habit of curling up like a ball in the back seat of his car and, invisible to the rear-view mirror, would pose strange questions to his driver. Once, out of the blue, he is said to have asked, "Can a man become a sexual deviant late in life?" A second version of this question is reported: "Can a man, who has not known sexual deviancy in his entire life, suddenly find his desire strengthen in the opposite direction, and strive for a man to penetrate him?" Yet a third version of the question is circulated: "Can a man turn into a sexual deviant after fifty?" (*T-II*: 76). We do not know the driver's response, and the question is as bewildering to the reader as it is to the employees of the Foundation. The chief executive is known to have a wife and children, as well as numerous mistresses. There is no context to prepare us to expect this question, apart from the appearance of a "well-groomed" chauffeur who suffers from one of the chief

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executive's notoriously capricious an unexplained grudges. The explanation, I think, must be sought in terms of a simmering "homosexual panic," which Sedgwick, among others, have linked to the fear of one's own latent homosexuality. This is the fear expressed in the question posed by the chief executive, who reveals himself to be insecure about the stability of his heterosexual desires. In particular, it is the potential exploitability of the passive position that he fears.

This same anxiety finds other outlets for expression, such as an equally random and unexpected warning which several parents issue to their children. In one instance, a secretary finds herself caught in traffic, and her mind wanders to concerns about her two sons. Of the youngest, she expresses "her constant fear that someone will play a trick on him, as she had also feared for his older brother. She has tried … to warn them against playing games in which a boy must bend over, or in which boys jump over each other" (*T-I*: 143-144). An identical warning occurs later in a different context, when a stepmother cautions her adopted son "not to take off his clothes in front of anyone, not to play English leapfrog, and not to let anyone touch his rear" (*T-II*: 164). Nor is this the first time that this warning has occurred in a work by al-Ghitani: it occurs in nearly identical form in his short story, "This is What Happened to the Aleppan" (1995: 446-448). In all cases, this fear of male homosexual exploitation is localized on the anus, which is vulnerable at all moments to penetration.[79] By extension, the boy (or in the case of the

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[79] Sedgwick also suggests that "an anal erotic salience of male homosexuality is if anything increasingly strong under the glare of heterosexist AIDS-phobia" (2008: 35). In other words, anxiety-laden conceptions of male homosexuality often reduce it to a sexuality of the anus (rather than other organs or practices). This becomes acute amidst fears that AIDS will be transmitted in this way; thus it is perhaps no coincidence that in the chapter preceding the entrance of Fayruz Bahari, entitled "Immune Deficiency," an employee is rumored to have AIDS (*T-II*: 146). Although the employee is female, the specter of homosexuality appears nonetheless in the strange confusion of signs common to linguistic communities in late capitalism. At this point in the novel, the Foundation is in negotiations to join global organizations known only by such queer acronyms as COMSA, FIFA, FAW, and BINOLUX. When word spreads that an employee has contracted AIDS, an anonymous voice asks, "What does AIDS have to do with COMSA?" (Ibid.). COMSA (*kūmsā* in the Arabic) is homophonous with *komsā*, an Egyptian homosexual argot word for "gay," allegedly derived from French. Thus the question, alternately rendered, is "What does AIDS have

chief executive, the man) loses control, and his agency is parasited by another. It is thus not only the psycho-sexual trauma that is feared, but also the perennial concern of being "other-taken" or taken over by an insidious other. This is perhaps the expression in the sexual domain of the kind of paranoia about hidden enemies and conspirators that may be deemed endemic in certain leadership classes at certain moments of historical change and uncertainty. It is particularly acute, too, in these two novels, in view of the unexplained promotions, the "veiling" or secrecy of the twelfth floor, and the constantly posed question about who is really in charge.[80] The male homosexual predator in this case may be read as the latest in a series of personifications of the parasitic menace, coming after such figures as "the rumormonger," "the conspirator," "the imperialist" or "the freemason" (cf. Chapter 8).[81]

The preceding symptoms of homosexual panic are not (only) acts of literary foreshadowing; rather, they lay bare the psychological and narrative threads from which the rumor is woven and on account of which it makes so much noise. An analysis of such contextual threads, as in the preceding, is necessary for a fuller understanding of the emergence and impact of a rumor, as they take us beyond more reductive approaches that emphasize pathology or the conspiratorial figure of the author. However, the extent of the *poésie fabuleuse* in this case needs also to be understood as the effects of what I have called seduction. Fayruz Bahari seduces a

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to do with the gay man?" The anxiety about the male homosexual violator, whose target and sign is the anus, is thus expressed obliquely in the few pages preceding the appearance of Fayruz.

[80] This paranoia is directly expressed soon after Fayruz's appointment, as people ask "Who is planning? Who is making the decisions? [*man yukhaṭṭiṭ? man yuqarrir?*] It is difficult to determine, what's happening now is strange, deviant [*shādhdh*] from everything familiar" (184). Note the language of "planning" (*yukhaṭṭiṭ*), identical to that discussed in Chapter 2. In this short passage, "paranoia" is directly linked to "homosexual panic" through the word *shādhdh*, which has the general meaning of "deviant" and the specific meaning of "sexual deviant" or "homosexual."

[81] There has been plenty of scholarship on Arabic literature that reads the "sodomite" (*lūṭī*) or male homosexual predator as a figure for foreign exploitation (eg. Guth 1995; Lagrange 2006). Foreign exploitation is too general a notion; I suggest that the paranoid style is a more precise description of the anxiety here.

number of employees – in particular, his ostensible enemies or challengers – who are eager to grasp his secrets in detail both for the pleasure of discovery and the simple urge to destroy.

Fayruz's very name mimics the principle strategy of seduction as proposed by Baudrillard: the oscillation between absence and presence, between seen and unseen. In Arabic, *fayrūz* is "turquoise," a gemstone to be unearthed; *baḥarī* may occur in the phrase ʿa-l-baḥarī, meaning "on display" or "open for all to see," often with meretricious connotations. Thus Fayruz Bahari is at once a rare, secret stone and a show which bares all; he is once seen, then unseen, once in *khafāʾ*, and once in *jalāʾ* (the opposite of *khafāʾ*). As custodian of the Treasure Trove, he stays true to this name. Many of his actions at the Foundation are ʿa-l-baḥarī, including his flashy television appearances, his projects for the renovation and display of the Treasure Trove, his proposal to make a film fictionalizing the life of the elusive chief executive (180-181), and his organization of what critics claim is celebration for the sake of celebration (254-255). It is even said that Fayruz "takes pride in displaying his condition" (214) – that is, his sexuality. At the same time, however, he remains just as obscure as the Foundation's other major power brokers. It is decided, after the whispering has become too loud, that Fayruz Bahari and his suspected partner shall be officially included among the officials "whom it is forbidden to observe, whose movements are not to be watched, and whose calls are not to be recorded" (261). The challenge of the seduction is too much to resist.

In the Foundation, there is no shortage of those prurient with the desire to expose Fayruz's secrets, though it is a desire stronger in some than in others. Many employees, it would seem, are content to pass on the rumors already in circulation, while others are have their gazes fixated on his rear-end (*muʾakhkhara*), hoping to discern some hidden detail (182, 214). Others are driven totally mad by the alleged impropriety, and exert wild efforts simply to defame

Fayruz. These include a newspaper editorial warning of the dangers of "this type" taking office (154), a website that digs up salacious reports on Fayruz's "deviant" activism (218-219), and an older employee who bursts out into the hallway, shouting "anything but this sodomite!" (200). Such efforts are in vain. One particular employee, however, seems to be more seduced than the rest. His name is ʿAbdu al-Namarsi.

Who is ʿAbdu al-Namarsi? We hear of him first in *T-I*, when he is introduced as "ʿAbdu the pimp" (86). He is a grotesque figure who boasts of his ability to seduce any woman, and transfer her desires to one of his wealthy clients. In both novels, the reader hears him recount the sordid details of the audio and video recordings he has made of his clients in the bedroom, which he desires one day to publish – not necessarily with the aim of destroying reputations, but rather to satisfy his interest in a recondite form of *scientia sexualis*. The essence of his practice, or "gift" as it is called (214), is the same as that enjoyed by the chauffeur ʿAmm Sharaf, the concierge al-Ashmuni, and others: the discernment of hidden knowledge. He is driven by "a curiosity stimulated by the attempt to discern what the senses cannot detect" (226). Accessing this secret sexual knowledge serves a double function: the delight immanent to voyeurism and analysis, and the ability to control and manipulate the person whose secrets he has found. When Fayruz appears, and pushes al-Namarsi further away from the executive twelfth floor, he does not merely make an enemy; rather, he pushes al-Namarsi's voyeuristic abilities into overdrive, seducing him with the flickering prospect of hidden sexual knowledge. Al-Namarsi is used to thinking that it is he who seduces others; he still appears to think this. But as Baudrillard has argued, the dialectics and directions of seduction are not so easily framed: in seducing, one is also seduced.[82] Fayruz seduces al-Namarsi, though the latter believes it the other way around.

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[82] "The cycle of seduction cannot be stopped. One can seduce someone in order to seduce someone else, but also seduce someone else to please oneself. The illusion that leads from one to the other is subtle. Is it to seduce, or to

We only know this because it is al-Namarsi's thoughts that we hear, and never those of Fayruz: the latter is an object closed to narrative empathy and comprehensibility, and may only be accessed by wild speculation, rumor, and the illusion of seduction. The pimp quickly declares his task: "Fayruz's condition and behavior astonish al-Namarsi, and he is absorbed in anticipation of what he will show next. Despite his aversion to such types, his curiosity is yet stronger … From now on, he will attempt to discern the details of the likes of Fayruz" (*T-II*: 168). Everywhere Fayruz Bahari leaves a trace, ʿAbdu al-Namarsi eagerly gropes about for the hidden meaning. He begins, as always, with a reading of surfaces: Fayruz's rear is thin, he observes, as opposed to his partner's "full" rear (*muktanaza* – it is full of *kunūz* or "treasures," 169). Over the course of several chapters, al-Namarsi builds a more and more complete narrative, shot through with a *poésie fabuleuse*, of Fayruz's sex life, emotional attachment to his partner "Farih," and intimate relation with "Gladiyus," a "whore" who has the ear of the chief executive. The more he discovers, it seems, the more he is seduced forward. This process is captured neatly in a single phrase: "Fayruz is taken to, but does not give" (*fayrūz yuʾtā wa lā yaʾtī*) (167). The phrase is to be read, first, as a euphemism for the passive position in sexual intercourse (Fayruz receives anal penetration, he does not penetrate). This is in itself a salacious detail in which al-Namarsi finds pleasure. But it also describes the seduction of secret knowledge: the phrase "*Knowledge* must be taken, it does not come by itself" (*al-ʿilm yuʾtā wa lā yaʾtī*) is attributed to Imam Malik, the founder of one of the four main schools of Sunni

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be seduced, that is seductive? But to be seduced is the best way to seduce. It is an endless refrain. There is no active or passive mode in seduction, no subject or object, no interior or exterior: seduction plays on both sides, and there is no frontier separating them. One cannot seduce others, if one has not oneself been seduced" (81). Baudrillard's penchant for bold proclamations is fed by the inexhaustible reservoirs of the counterintuitive. Still, I think it fine to suggest that it is Fayruz who seduces al-Namarsi, and not at all the other way around.

jurisprudence.[83] Thus knowledge of Fayruz must be sought after, for it does not yield itself. It is a seductive challenge that al-Namarsi takes up in total obsession.

It is not long before the pimp must begrudgingly admit to himself that Fayruz Bahari is not merely an enemy or rival, but a challenger who attracts him in a positive sense. "Al-Namarsi always likes a nice game, even if he is against it" (181), and indeed, when faced with Fayruz, "he cannot ignore that hidden sense of admiration that flows through him" (217). This sense, this seductive pull, strengthens every time he hears about Fayruz's new schemes and projects for the Foundation. It is hardened into jealousy when he hears that Fayruz is beating him at his own game: the custodian of the Treasure Trove is able to woo others with his uncanny ability to reveal hidden knowledge. "The breadth of his knowledge is amazing, from color dyeing to the interpretation of dreams, in addition to urban planning, the design of gardens, and all so many civilized matters and sublime affairs" (243). This leads his friend and sponsor Gladiyus to exclaim repeatedly: "You know everything!" (245). It becomes clear that against such a penetratingly intelligent figure, whose "gift" is greater than his own, al-Namarsi cannot win.

The moment comes when he thinks he has finally caught Fayruz. He sends him an envelope containing sexually explicit photographs captured of him and his partner. But he is already out-maneuvered: "In what newspaper or magazine would you like them published?" Fayruz asks his would-be blackmailer (261). In this climactic scene, several things are happening at once. There is an eruption of homosexual panic, as al-Namarsi is shocked off balance by the realization that "sexual deviants" control the press. It is a glimpse, delivered in yellow-dramatic fashion, of the hidden hands that manipulate the order of things in this strange post-industrial era. He has been caught, as it were, from behind. At the same time, we

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[83] The saying occurs in a number of sources. See, for example, the tafsir of al-Suyuti, *al-Durr al-Manthur fi al-Tafsir bi al-Maʾthur* (Sura 4: 95).

understand – even if al-Namarsi seems unable to recognize it himself – that his special gift, his means of seduction, has been rendered obsolete. What value does his "secret knowledge," so artfully obtained, really have? Not so much: it is possible that Fayruz is genuinely welcoming the publishing of these photographs. Al-Namarsi has no really valuable information, its power as a secret is diffused, and no rumor he would spread could make any difference so far as Fayruz Bahari is concerned. Let all be ʿa-l-baḥarī, he seems to be saying. Al-Namarsi is frustrated, but he is not any less seduced: he fades into the background, and the last we hear of him, he cannot stop himself from expressing fascination and surprise (308).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to elucidate the emergence of rumors in terms of secrecy and seduction. Fantastical stories, in these cases, are put together through acts of popular speculation about seductive objects – personalities and props that oscillate between obscurity and ostentation. These acts of speculation have become popular and widespread, due to the pervasive culture of secrecy, and the proliferation of seductive figures. Speculation is also refined into an art, deemed a "gift," possessed by experts such as the chauffeur ʿAmm Sharaf, the concierge al-Ashmuni, and the pimp ʿAbdu al-Namarsi. Often times, the knowledge gleaned through speculation is fantastical and distorted through the prisms of hope and anxiety; often times, it contains a measure of truth. Almost always, it is sexual knowledge, or at least simmers with a sexual heat (that is, even if it does not deal with intercourse or genitalia, a hidden essence seems tinged with erotic possibility). Perhaps this is because, as Foucault has made famous, modern society has constituted sex as "*the* secret" (1990: 35) to be penetrated, analyzed, and confessed. Other topics are there to be discussed and rumored as well – maybe Fayruz Bahari is

shipping priceless artifacts abroad (he *is* shipping priceless artifacts abroad), maybe he's complicit in fraud and bribery (he *is* complicit in fraud and bribery) – but their circulation does not make the same level of noise.

At the beginning of this chapter, al-Jahiz observed the popular obsession with secrets and scandals of kings. But in the Foundation, it is apparent that desirous (or anxious) speculation is not a practice pursued only by the masses with respect to their superiors. We should know this, of course, were it not for the common emphasis on rumor as a kind of "mass" pathology. Those who inhabit the executive twelfth floor are so often as secretive and seductive to each other as they are to those outside, or below. They speculate and rumor about one another, as al-Namarsi does with Fayruz Bahari. It is also the case – though I have not elaborated on this here – that the rulers of the Foundation spy, speculate, and rumor about the employees below them (*T-I*: 120). And the seduction works in one more direction that cannot escape us: the readers. In the following chapter, I examine how the novels seduce the readers themselves, prodding us with the prospect of secret knowledge and driving us into the channels of rumor. This will form part of a broader examination of how the novels operate for Gamal al-Ghitani in their particular historical and political context.

Chapter 6: Tales of Gamal al-Ghitani: Caricature, Noise, and Seduction

"Literature feeds off the blood of gossip!" So blasts the title of a 2006 article in the Saudi newspaper *al-Sharq al-Awsat*.[84] With much indignation, the author condemns what he labels "gossip literature" (*adab al-namīma*), the special product of downtown Cairo's "triangle of terror": an area delimited by three cafes where artists and intellectuals gather nightly ("and in particular on Tuesday") to stick their noses where they do not belong. The occasion for this article was the publication of a book, aptly titled *The Book of Gossip*, by one of the revered elders of modern Egyptian literature, Sulayman Fayyad. But, the author of the article claims, "gossip literature" has a history in Egypt which stretches all the way back to the Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz himself with the novel *Mirrors*, released in paperback in 1972. In his list of such works, the author does not fail to include Gamal al-Ghitani's *Tales of the Foundation* and *Tales of the Treasure Trove*.

A number of scholars have remarked on the similarities that much literature, and in particular the novel, shares with gossip. Orhan Pamuk, for example, observes that both gossip and the novel, as forms of discourse, are motivated by a natural, voyeuristic curiosity about other people (2011: 61).[85] But Muhammad Abu Zayd, the author of the above article, has in mind something more specific: not a general similarity between all novels and gossip, but particular novels whose literary form is nothing but a thin cover for malicious gossip about real characters in the real world. The literary critic Faruq ʿAbd al-Qadir is to be given credit for applying a similar label to Gamal al-Ghitani's *T-I* and *T-II*: he calls them "bad-mouth literature" (*adab al-talsīn*) and "the literature of 'you know who, dear neighbor'" (*adab iyyāka aʿnī fa-smaʿī yā gāra*)

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[84] www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=19&article=394285&issueno=10228.
[85] The full argument on the connection between 19th-century novels and gossip is spelled out by Patricia Meyer Spacks in her book, *Gossip* (1986).

(2003: 176). These two novels, and in particular *T-II*, he says, "made quite a bit of noise," as their author stands accused of "settling personal scores" and taking his novel into "a territory that had been restricted to gossip sessions and chattering in the coffeehouse" (147). The "tales" (*ḥikāyāt*) of Gamal al-Ghitani, continues ʿAbd al-Qadir with his own showing of tongue, are more akin to "the prattles of old pensioners in their cafes" (176).

Following ʿAbd al-Qadir's cue, in this chapter I examine how *T-I* and *T-II* have earned such labels as "gossip literature" and "bad-mouth literature." My claim is that there are several different ways in which these novels participate in the arts and politics of rumor that I have analyzed in the preceding two chapters, as they shoot out at characters in the real world. First, I focus exclusively on *Tales of the Foundation* (*T-I*). Reading the "tales" about the Founder (*al-muʾassis*) as "rumors" about the newspaper giant Mustafa Amin, I argue that, *pace* ʿAbd al-Qadir, al-Ghitani's intent is more reverential homage than malicious "prattle." This is not only because of the mostly benign content of the rumors. For a manner of homage is also paid to Mustafa Amin in the very style which al-Ghitani adopts for the novels: it is the yellow journalism for which the founder of *Akhbar al-Yawm* became infamous in Egypt's mid-twentieth century. More specifically, I interpret this style as a form of caricature, which aims at humor through the deployment of grotesque bodily images, the objectification of women, and various kinds of physical and emotional exaggeration. Al-Ghitani imitates this style, in part, as a tribute to his former employer. After this reading of the author's relationship to the Founder/Mustafa Amin as expressed in *T-I*, I turn to an analysis of the author's treatment of another major figure in *T-II*: Fayruz Bahari. This is a thinly veiled caricature of Faruq Husni, the former Minister of Culture, and preeminent adversary to Gamal al-Ghitani. The salacious tales al-Ghitani tells about Husni, I argue, may be read on the one hand as a form of noise, and on the other, as the

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effects of seduction. In other words, al-Ghitani's rumormongering is to be understood by analogy to the practice of ʿAtiyya Beh – who championed the principle, "if the bullet doesn't hit, it still makes noise" – and the exploits of ʿAbdu al-Namarsi, who found himself incurably obsessed with the sexual secrets of Fayruz Bahari. I conclude this chapter by arguing that al-Ghitani's text itself plays a game of "seduction" with the readers, tantalizing them with secrets and encouraging further speculative gossip.

News of Mustafa Amin

The talk of the town began with the two, Mustafa Amin and ʿAli Amin. Their birth on February 21, 1914, as narrated later by a loyal friend, was nothing short of mythical. Likened to an "earthquake," their entrance into the world happened to be "The House of the Nation" – the residence of the nationalist leader and revolutionary Saʿd Zaghlul, whose niece was their mother (Shusha 1977: 27). Mustafa was "plump" and ʿAli was "thin"; when the former seemed to become ill, one of the nurses ordered that for his survival, he must be bathed each day in wine. "And thus," the story goes, "wine entered the House of the Nation for the first time," and Mustafa was saved (Ibid.). Today, it is Mustafa, called "the Giant," who is the more remembered and mythologized of the two brothers; but it was both of them who, in 1944, established the foundation Akhbar al-Yawm ("The News of the Day"). Promising to bring Hearst-style journalism to Egypt, it quickly grew into one of the largest and most formidable media conglomerates in the country: its history, closely intertwined with, and generative of, the major cultural and political transformations of the mid-to-late twentieth century, forms the allegorical intertext of Gamal Al-Ghitani's novel *Tales of the Foundation* (*T-I*).

The Akhbar al-Yawm Foundation is best known for its weekly newspaper, also named *Akhbar al-Yawm* (est. 1944), and its daily *al-Akhbar* (est. 1952). If today these are difficult to distinguish in their widely perceived monotony and crabbed regime-speak from other official and semi-official papers like *al-Ahram* and *al-Gumhuriyya*,[86] they were for several decades a buzzing nest of revolution, counter-revolution, sex, intrigue, and creative force that hosted in various capacities the biggest names in Egyptian politics, literature, and arts. Apart from the Amin twins, *Akhbar al-Yawm* adopted or introduced writers like Ihsan ʿAbd Al-Quddus, Musa Sabri, Safinaz Kazim, Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal, and Muhammad Al-Tabiʿi. Even President Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Vice President Anwar Sadat, occupied its offices at various points. It is also the place where Gamal al-Ghitani, having already begun his literary production, got his start as a newspaper reporter in 1969. He would later become editor of the literary section of *Akhbar al-Yawm*, before taking over as chief editor of the foundation's separate literary journal, *Akhbar al-Adab*, when it was launched in 1993. Al-Ghitani remained in this position until shortly before the Revolution of 25 January, 2011.

Tales of the Foundation (*T-I*) was published in 1997, the very year of Mustafa Amin's death. The many points of similarity between "the Founder" (*al-muʾassis*) and "the Foundation" (*al-muʾassasa*) as narrated in the novel, and the Mustafa Amin and Akhbar al-Yawm of legend, may be outlined briefly, before analyzing the form and function of al-Ghitani's literary gossip. I take my lead from Al-Musawi (2003: 302) and ʿAbd al-Qadir (2003), who both observe connections between the Foundation and Akhbar al-Yawm. The Founder chose for his Foundation a plot of land in an undeveloped part of Cairo, and was responsible for the subsequent modernization of the area (*T-I*: 5-7, 15). So did Mustafa Amin risk ruin by building

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[86] Whence the joke, *ēh il-akhbār? – zayy il-ahrām* ("What's new/the news/*Al-Akbhar*?" – "Same as *Al-Ahram*"). *Akhbar Al-Yawm* is officially owned by the Shura Council, Egypt's Upper House of Parliament.

the offices of Akhbar al-Yawm in an underdeveloped neighborhood in Cairo. According to one account, the premises had to be cleared of trash, scorpions, and snakes, as well as slum dwellings and feminine "mudslinging" (*radḥ*), before the area became famous as "Journalists' Street" (Shahin 1957: 18-21); the novelistic rendition does not depart far from this, with a particular reference to the snakes (*T-I*: 204). *T-I* also tells of the Foundation's nationalization (35), and the imprisonment of the Founder as a result of a quarrel with the intelligence agencies (264). The details of these two incidents, referred as the "lesser tragedy" and the "greater tragedy," come close to the nationalization of Akhbar al-Yawm in 1960 (cf. Shusha 1977: 241), and the imprisonment of Mustafa Amin on espionage charges in 1965.[87] Finally, the novel repeatedly mentions the amorous affairs of the Founder, which often climaxed in a sexual act in his office interrupted by the entrance of another employee (*T-I*: 36, 120, 128, 234, 313-314). Identical rumors of love have long swirled around Mustafa Amin. The singer of the nation Umm Kulthum, the actresses Tahiyya Kariyuka, Madiha Yusri, Fatin Hamama, and even Empress Fawziyya: the most desired women of Egypt's mid-twentieth century, all were said to have had special relations with the newspaper magnate, often behind the unlocked doors of his offices on Journalists' Street in downtown Cairo (Shahin 1957: 69, 77).

But what is the reader to make of these correspondences between Amin and the Founder? In *Tales of the Foundation*, are we confronted with a "settling of scores," as ʿAbd al-Qadir suggests? Was it Gamal al-Ghitani's intent to write a malicious exposé, laced with poisonous insinuation and rumor, of his recently deceased boss? Even if we are to settle on this reading of simple one-to-one correspondences between history and fiction – as I suggest we do – the

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[87] Amin was released from prison in 1974, reportedly at the personal question of the Singer of the Nation, Umm Kulthum. Though the case remains controversial, both detractors and supporters seem today to recognize that Amin had some degree of involvement in espionage. See, for example, Ibrahim ʿIsa's fawning but condemnatory article, "al-ʿUmlaq alladhi Tagassas" ["The 'Giant' who Spied"], *al-Dustur*, 1/21/2010. Others whitewash the case (e.g. Shusha 1977: 242), and personal adversaries like Salah Nasr blackwash it (e.g. Nasr 1975).

evaluative stance of the author (or rumormonger) is rather more complicated than a term like "bad-mouth literature" would suggest. On the one hand, I think, had al-Ghitani's intention been to write an "objective" history of Akhbar al-Yawm, he would have had no choice but to write it in this way, that is, in this mix of gossip, epistemic fuzziness, and anonymous report. As Di-Capua has argued, national history writing in postcolonial Egypt has suffered from the lack of an open state archive, driving many to compose histories out of the only available materials: newspapers, hearsay, gossip, and smuggled documents (2009: 325; 2012: 88).[88] Similarly, Akhbar al-Yawm, despite its legendary archive (Shahin 1957: 207), is a foundation whose structures of secrecy mimic those of the state. The novel itself makes this observation in a passage I have quoted in Chapter 5: in the Foundation, there is something that "defies observation … recording, and analysis," and which "has not been captured in poetry or prose" (*T-I*: 78). Perhaps it can only be captured in the gossipy digressions of al-Ghitani's *ḥikāyāt*.

The lack of an objective basis for writing a history of the Akhbar al-Yawm Foundation, or a biography of Mustafa Amin, might explain the peculiar epistemological instability of the novel, but not the author's evaluative stance that ʿAbd al-Qadir insists is negative. It might be said, first of all, that Gamal al-Ghitani's relation to Mustafa Amin is one of ambivalence. One finds this sense made explicit in a series of interviews al-Ghitani conducted with the newspaper magnate, published in 1983 as the book *Mustafa Amin Remembers*. On the back cover, al-Ghitani remarks that although he does not consider himself part of Amin's "school" of journalism, he nonetheless respects his "struggle for freedoms." Ambivalence, yes, but the detection of ambivalence, while a necessary alternative to evaluative reductionism, is too common an analytic gesture that risks becoming meaningless if it is not qualified and sketched out further. I would like to argue that *Tales of the Foundation*, in addition to its implicit

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[88] See also Mehrez (2005: 8), on the Egyptian novelist as an "underground historian."

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criticism of Mustafa Amin – which is obvious enough from the novel's allusions to the Founder's sexual impropriety and his fetishistic personality cult – can also be read as an homage to the father of Egyptian yellow journalism (replete, no doubt, with ambivalence). I base this claim on the novel's style, which I read as a playful imitation of the kind of sensationalist reporting that made Mustafa Amin famous. Al-Ghitani pays tribute to his former boss by telling his story in the style which suits him most.

Most commonly, Mustafa Amin's style of journalism might be called *ithārī* ("sensationalist" or "inflammatory"). His opponents would rather call it rumormongering, or, in the words of his archenemy Salah Nasr, the former head of Egypt's General Intelligence Agency, Amin's *Akhbar al-Yawm* was as cacophonous as "the howling of wolves and the screeching of crows" (1975: 6), and sounded like "the seething hiss of vipers with their deadly poison" (81). His friends disagreed. The famous political cartoonist ʿAbd al-Munʿim Rakha, for example, called Amin a "writer of caricature" (*kātib kārīkātīrī*) – in other words, he produced in prose what the cartoonist produced in drawing (Abu al-ʿAynayn 1990: 174-175). This is quite an accurate description of Amin's style as imitated by al-Ghitani in *Tales of the Treasure Trove*. If I am to give this transgeneric mode a name, it might be "caricature thrice over": al-Ghitani imitating Amin, who was imitating cartoonists, who caricature celebrities.[89] But it is more important to identify the constitutive elements of this style, and speculate on their poetic functions, than to be burdened by more neologisms. Several elements stand out: grotesque or distorted bodily images; the exaggeration of affect and emotion; and the objectification of women.

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[89] Or one might want to simply call this parody. For my full discussion of parody and playful imitation, including the unwieldiness of taxonomies that produce terms like "caricature thrice over," see Chapter 8.

Nearly all the characters in the novel are drawn as clownish types with exaggerated physical and emotional contours. If the Founder is spared objectification of this kind, other employees, high and low, are not so lucky. "The Professor," manager of the Foundation's garage and a major contender for the executive office, gets stuck with the nickname "Professor Colcasia" due to the unusual shape of

> his totally bald head, with its protrusions and undulations, and its remarkable cavity that sticks out like a billboard leaning forward. Underneath are his perpetually goggled eyes, which some claim remain open even when he is fast asleep. His head is connected directly to his shoulders, as his neck is virtually nonexistent, so that when he turns around or looks at someone on his left or right, he turns with his whole body. No less strange than his head is the formation of his full, tremendous rump, with the pendulous motion of its two halves: one, two, one, two. (*T-I*: 56).

Al-Namarsi, the pimp, is similarly "repulsive" with a head similar to that of the Professor, except that, whereas the latter's colcasia "folds forward," the former's cranium "leans backward" (141). Another character, Hamdi al-Izmirli, suffers from a "subtle imbalance in the arrangement of his parts," which distorts him, despite his size, into rather the shape of a child (279). The remainder of the novel's male characters are more or less malformed; even if we know virtually nothing about some of them, we are always given a full physical description. Affect, too, is grossly distorted, and is more often shown than told. Thus, when the Professor becomes aggravated, "his head takes a more rectangular shape, or perhaps a rounded shape, depending on one's perspective, and the direction of light" (102). With these graphic exaggerations, al-Ghitani's prose is rather closely homologous to the representative style of the *rassām kārīkātīr* or (political) cartoonist and, by extension, is a playful imitation of Mustafa Amin's writing style.

Following the novel, one may separate the female characters into a class of their own. Almost without exception, they are paragons of beauty, but it is a beauty debauched by a certain

meretriciousness, and laced with descriptive threads that weigh rather heavy: Rashida is "an explosive female" (123), Safiyya burns with a "devastating flame" (221), and Hanim enjoys "a firmness of beauty, a rumbling roar of freshness [*zamzamat al-ṭarāwa*; an almost nonsensical phrase], and a green, human emerald shine" (243). They are, in other words, sexually objectified; they are targets of the male chauvinistic gaze. This is a representative mode common to many of Gamal al-Ghitani's novels. But more specifically, the women in *Tales of the Foundation* (and later in *Tales of the Treasure Trove*) resemble closely the hollow figures of fantasy concocted or caricatured by Mustafa Amin in a number of his trashy novels (Amin was known not only for his sensationalist journalism but for his numerous memoires and "literary" works which blended fact and fiction). In *T-I* and *T-II*, we encounter women with names like al-Anisa Intishar ("Miss Intishar"), Hanim al-Dumyatiyya ("Hanim the Damiettan" or "The Damiettan Dame"), and Rashida al-Nimsawiyya ("Rashida the Austrian"). They may be compared with the shy seductresses featured in books by Mustafa Amin, such as *Sitt al-Husn* ("The Lady of Beauty," 1976), *al-Anisa Huyam*, ("Miss Passion," 1985), and *al-Anisa Kaf* ("Miss K," 1985). If at first glance the appearance of objectified women characters in *Tales of the Foundation* would seem to reflect Gamal al-Ghitani's male chauvinism, a second degree reading would suggest that these characters also form an important part of the author's playful imitation of Mustafa Amin's objectifying and caricatural style.

Of course playful imitation does not rule out a measure of critique. But a careful reading of the intertextuality between Mustafa Amin's notorious sensational style, and Gamal al-Ghitani's *Tales of the Foundation*, cannot help but detect the signs of a more amicable relationship between the two. If it is not the relationship between teacher and student – as al-Ghitani had said, he does not belong to Amin's "school" – neither is it the relationship between

boss and disgruntled, gossiping employee. And yet, and yet: the reader can forget everything he knows about this special relationship, for the fact remains that it is now Gamal al-Ghitani, not Mustafa Amin, who is writing in this peculiar caricatural style. This is important because there are other figures, contemporaries of the author, who become objects of his anything-but-amicable rumormongering.

Faruq Husni: The Noise and the Seduction

The unusual name "Fayruz Bahari" has the same syllable structure as "Faruq Husni," Egypt's culture czar for nearly thirty years. His tenure as the flamboyant Minister of Culture, from his appointment by President Mubarak in 1987 until the revolution of January 25, 2011, was marked by periodic scandals – some of which, it was rumored, had been ingeniously orchestrated by the minister himself. These include the display of his own rather mediocre paintings in Egyptian museums, the alleged renting or sale of Pharaonic artifacts to foreign museums and collectors in exchange for personal benefits, a deadly fire at one of the ministry's theaters in Beni Souief in 2005, derogatory remarks he made about the hijab in 2007, his expensive and unsuccessful bid to become Director-General on UNESCO in 2009, and the theft of a Van Gogh painting from a Ministry of Culture museum in broad daylight in 2010. In addition, his private life has been the subject of gossip and crude innuendo in the corridors of power, the national press, and the taxis of Cairo – much of which centers on his alleged homosexuality or "sexual deviance." The rumors are usually embellished with details that the minister keeps a palace full of handsome male servants, exploits his office to engage in loud sex orgies, maintains a flirtatious relationship with the president's wife and son, and enjoys close ties to the security services and European

organized crime. All of these details are woven into the character Fayruz Bahari, the "Supervisor of the Treasure Trove," in *Tales of the Treasure Trove* (*T-II*).

In order to analyze the rhetorical function of this novel in terms of the author's relationship with the former minister, I will first zoom out to get a larger picture of the relationship between littérateurs and the state in modern Egypt. This relationship has been studied most comprehensively by Samia Mehrez (2008), with a particular focus on cultural politics in the late Mubarak years. Mehrez notes that littérateurs, and intellectuals more generally, have maintained fraught alliances with the "political field" since Muhammad ʿAli's sponsorship of secular civil servants in the early to mid-eighteenth century. A defining feature of this "cultural field" as Mehrez calls it (following Bourdieu), is its dependence upon, and manipulation by, the state. If artists and intellectuals have depended on state funding, the state, for its part, has sought to sponsor or control this secular cultural field in order to counter the parallel power structure of religious groups and institutions. As Mehrez puts it, "cultural producers maintain the most ambiguous relationship with the state that is at once their patron and their persecutor" (2008: 6). The terms of this relationship have shifted, but not radically changed, over the course of the twentieth century: Nasser's establishment of the Ministry of Culture reaffirmed this relationship; Sadat's sidelining of the cultural field led to a resurgent Islamism; Mubarak's renewed engagement with the cultural field found its boldest expression in his constant support for Faruq Husni. As Minister of Culture, Husni sought to radically reaffirm the state's role in culture, through ambitious and costly projects and campaigns, and by seducing many artists and intellectuals into the government's "pen" (*ḥaẓīra*, a common characterization).

Gamal al-Ghitani, as editor of the literary journal *Akhbar al-Adab*, launched a heated campaign against the minister in numerous articles and editorials beginning in the mid-1990s. It

is reported that at one point, al-Ghitani had gone so far as to describe Husni's ascendancy to the ministry as "no less dangerous to Egypt than the 1967 Naksa."[90] Following Mehrez, one might read this campaign as a more recent expression of the historical tension between the cultural field and the political field: al-Ghitani as the representative of the former, and Faruq Husni as the representative of the latter. This is indeed how Mehrez frames the issue, in particular when discussing the battle between the two men over the state's impounding of literary works (2008: 15). What Mehrez leaves out of her reading are the rumors that nearly everyone was saying, if not writing, about the minister throughout this period. But, I argue, one cannot fully understand the forms and motivations of al-Ghitani's battles with Husni with reference to professional principles and the dynamics of "fields." One must also take into account these rumors – only insinuated by the author in *Akhbar al-Adab*, but made most explicit in *Tales of the Treasure Trove* – which provided the hidden intertexts – heard but not seen – for one of the most important feuds in Egyptian cultural politics during the Mubarak years.

Why does Gamal al-Ghitani write Fayruz Bahari? Why does he spread the salacious stories about Faruq Husni? Answers can conveniently be found by analogy to the practices of two other characters sketched in the novels: ʿAtiyya Beh, "the rumormonger," and ʿAbdu al-Namarsi, "the pimp." To begin with, one may read al-Ghitani's assault on Husni as following ʿAtiyya Beh's slogan, "the bullet that doesn't hit still makes noise" (*il-ʿiyār illi mayṣibsh yidwish*). Al-Ghitani fires here not a direct bullet, or principled, accurate reportage – this he has already tried – but places his bets instead on the magnitude of the "noise" (*dōsha*) produced by a fabulous story of sex and deviance. He seeks to defeat his opponent by this alternative practice because nothing else seems to do the trick. Ostensibly, he is intent on dislodging Faruq Husni because he represents the state's assault on the cultural field; but he cannot, he thinks, counter

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[90] http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=324697

this assault merely by publishing accounts of the minister's financial shenanigans in *Akhbar al-Adab*. So, al-Ghitani takes up the advice of ʿAtiyya Beh: the more salacious the information, the noisier the rumor, the more certain its effects will be: thus the novel reports not only that Faryuz/Faruq is a "deviant" (*shādhdh*) and a "sodomite" (*lūṭī*), but also includes precise details about the types of boys he likes (168, 209), the excesses of the parties he calls "freeing the reigns" (250), and full visual and audio exposure of him in bed with his partner (244, 248, 260). The logic of this tactical noise is anarchic: the powerful must be removed at any cost. It is Machiavellian: the ends justify the means. It also risks being unethical; it is unethical, since its polemical stance towards this "sexual deviant" contradicts the openness towards sexual expression that al-Ghitani has so often called for in literature, if not in life.[91] It is not surprising, then, to find the anonymous narrator caught with a measure of ambivalence about this kind of critique, however brief:

> The more balanced voices, those known for their fairness of opinion, expressed disgust [with the rumors]: What does it concern us if he is a deviant or not a deviant? The important thing is his performance, and his competence. We shouldn't get into these personal issues.
> An expert said: Every tree catches some wind. Let everyone scrutinize his own past, and he will find something shameful that he does not admit. So why this pretense of infallibility, and why this slandering of Fayruz before he has even begun? (152)

Another character, who has launched a website dedicated to exposing Fayruz's sexual deviance, eventually suffers a brief pang of conscience:

> So, why does he attack Fayruz? Why does he take such a fierce position against him? Is it because he is known for his sexual deviance? Or because he has risen to a sensitive position?

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[91] For example, in an interview with al-ʿArabiyya in 2007, al-Ghitani says: "If we go back to the books of classical Arabic literature, we will find them much bolder than what is published today, and that society was more tolerant … The facts of life were discussed with freedom and elaborateness to the extent that I wish I had the freedom of al-Jahiz, al-Tawhidi, al-Asfahani, and Ibn Hazm." Available at: www.alarabiya.net/articles/2007/02/16/31735.html.

> Every person is free with his own body, but when it comes to filling such sensitive positions, it is necessary to perform the proper examinations.
> Examination of what? Is he kidding himself?
> Examination of what?
> Doesn't he know that this is the time for all abnormals? (228)

Regardless of these short ethical qualms, it is clear, as other readers have observed (cf. ʿAbd al-Qadir, Abu Zayd), that the thrust of al-Ghitani's *Tales of the Treasure Trove* is a polemical assault on Faruq Husni. The principle strategy of this polemic is the fabulous, exaggerated rendering of the rumors around his "sexual deviance." This strategy of noise – even if its promise is the subversion of state power – is in this case a very problematic one. As Eve Sedgwick has written of a different political context,

> it has at various times and for various reasons seemed to gay people that there was some liberatory potential in articulating the supposed homosexual secrets of men in power, often homophobic men. … It is always an intensely volatile move, depending as it does for its special surge of polemical force on the culture's (though not on the speaker's) underlying homophobic valuation of homosexual choice (and acquiescence in heterosexual exemption). (2008: 244-245)

Sedgwick was of course writing about gay liberation movements, not about Gamal al-Ghitani. But what she calls a "volatile move" can, I think, be adapted to the ethics of weaponized rumor in this case. If Gamal al-Ghitani's antagonism towards Faruq Husni is meant primarily as an attack on the state's attempts to coopt or oppress liberal intellectuals, the deployment of such an anti-liberal strategy as homosexual "outing" would seem rather problematic. Not only is it an unprincipled move, but it plays on anti-liberal (i.e. homophobic) strains within the culture at large. That is, the rumor's "special surge" – as Sedgwick called it, or "noise" as I call it – depends on an arousal of the very principles it is deployed against. Not that al-Ghitani intends to combat homophobia – a risible notion – rather, the liberal ideology he seeks to protect from state

meddling is not in the end well served by whipping up noise around the specter of "sexual deviance." If rumor is an alternative to more direct or accurate critique, it is in this case, I would argue, not a very effective one. In writing *Tales of the Treasure Trove*, Gamal al-Ghitani is much less felicitous a rumormonger than ʿAtiyya Beh.

There is one other figure that may help us understand al-Ghitani's narrative treatment of Faruq Husni, and that is ʿAbdu al-Namarsi. This "pimp" was drawn into a game of seduction with Fayruz Bahari. He had a prurient interest in sexual secrets, and this interest was aroused beyond his control with the flashy appearance of the Supervisor of the Treasure Trove. In what ways does the author resemble the pimp? Mona Zaki, in her brief review of *Tales of the Foundation*, argues that al-Ghitani "portrays al-Namarsi in the way he would like to present himself: a pimp with a personal philosophy on his 'art', a connoisseur of the female species, an assessor of beauty, an opportunist…" (2002: 14). Al-Ghitani is not al-Namarsi, but the psychological identification is close: he is the only character who plays a prominent role in both novels, and one of the few who are given any subjective complexity beyond their caricatural shells. And their seduction by Fayruz Bahari/Faruq Husni is comparable. Like Fayruz Bahari, Faruq Husni has been an elusive figure, always managing to escape the grasp of is critics – even after the Revolution of 25 January, he was one of the few former ministers of the Mubarak regime to escape trial or imprisonment. And his flashy appearance in the public eye can very well be described as having a "hypnotic" effect on some spectators, to use Baudrillard's word: book fairs, television interviews, cultural festivals, new museums, and so forth have been interposed and accentuated by his evasion of numerous legal and financial debacles.

If, following the model of ʿAtiyya Beh, I have read al-Ghitani's rumormongering as abrasively polemical ("noise"), it is by analogy to al-Namarsi's seduction that I may explain the

desirous, indeed obsessive, elements of his verbal challenge. There had always been scattered hints in the press and gossip cafes that there was more to the novelist's attacks against the minister – which he had begun launching from the perch of his journal *Akhbar al-Adab* before the end of the century – than cultural policy. As early as 2005, as al-Ghitani was still penning away at his challenger with allegations of corruption, a former media advisor to Husni released an "exposé" of the Ministry of Culture in which he deemed the conflict between the two men to be nothing but a big "joke" (ʿAbd al-Wahid 2005: 319). More eyebrows were raised in 2007, when al-Ghitani gingerly accepted a literary award from the Ministry of Culture.[92] In the same year, asked by reporters what al-Ghitani's problem was, Husni responded coolly, "Don't ask me, ask him. I don't have any information about this." He went on to add that he did not harbor any bad feelings towards the author, and that his critiques were all just part of "the cultural game."[93] In other words, the two were engaged in an exchange of challenges, a game of seduction, each attempting to claim the role of seducer and not that of the seduced. Or perhaps it was only al-Ghitani himself who was seduced, obsessed with a man who had no interest in taking up what he deemed a pathetic challenge. We might then not be surprised to find animosity so abruptly change to admiration. The novelist appeared beaming at the minister's personal art exhibit in Cairo in January, 2010. With a sideways smirk, he told television reporters that he had "been following the works of the artist Faruq Husni since the '80s," and that he could notice "a development in the use of colors and in the manifestation of form."[94] Surely these are the remarks of a fan – a man seduced – rather than a single-minded detractor. Just as al-Namarsi cannot help but express his admiration for Fayruz's physical dexterity and mastery of occult knowledge, so has al-Ghitani found that, despite his vitriolic attacks on Faruq Husni in the press,

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[92] http://today.almasryalyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=66539
[93] http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=324697
[94] The interview is available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAtPzrZ9d3Q&feature=related.

his admiration for the artist-minister's political and artistic savoir-faire has been difficult to contain.

Whatever the case, the "real" motives for al-Ghitani's feud with Husni, including his rumormongering in *Tales of the Treasure Trove*, remain something of a seductive enigma to spectators. I have suggested here that the portraits drawn of ʿAtiyya Beh and ʿAbdu al-Namarsi offer useful comparisons for elucidating the author's own aesthetics and politics of rumor. Indeed, to the extent that the author himself understands these comparisons, one might say that the two characters are drawn as part of an emergent project of self-stylization and experimentation. Ethically ambiguous, the two are not explicitly endorsed by al-Ghitani, but allow him a mode for reflecting on, problematizing, sifting through, redeeming, and occasionally embodying an alternative position in the Egyptian republic of letters. As ʿAtiyya Beh, he imagines himself as a gifted manufacturer of noise: a weapon whose consequences I have suggested are self-defeating, or at least cynical. As ʿAbdu al-Namarsi, he imagines himself as a master cracker of codes and revealer of sexual secrets. Also like al-Namarsi, he barely acknowledges his own seduction by the object of his critique. Having departed already from any rigorous notion of *engagement*, he attends to power rather in a mode of *engouement*, of obsession and attachment, both positive and negative, active and passive. Can the reader stand by unaffected?

The Seduction of the Reader

Faruq ʿAbd al-Qadir finds much that he does not like about the two novels: he has called them "bad-mouth literature" (*adab al-talsin*), among other things. Indeed "the main problem with this work," he complains, "is its vacillation between showing and hiding, between expressing and

insinuating, between what the narrator wants to say and what he is able to say" (2003: 148). He goes on to describe this process as "winking at the reader, seducing him to complicity [*ighrāʾ bi-l-tawāṭuʾ*]" (152). Can one have a better description of seduction's "sole strategy," the oscillation between presence and absence, "to be-there/not-there" (Baudrillard 1990: 85)? The symptoms irrupt immediately on the critic's own tongue: in the following sentences, he is seduced by the aura of secret knowledge, and proceeds to indulge himself by an enumeration of the many points of comparison between Akhbar al-Yawm, the Foundation, Mustafa Amin, and the Founder. He is drawn into reproducing the very gossipy discourse he has denounced; he cannot resist, such is the hypnotic enigma of Gamal al-Ghitani's prose.

Neither can this reader resist the seduction. One is drawn by the prose's "vacillation between showing and hiding" by the very obscurity of the novel's caricatures, who flash seemingly significant details like clothing, distinguishing features, and improbable names. One desires to grasp these characters who are so elusive, even if there is not really any there there. An interviewer put this question to Gamal al-Ghitani in 2004: "Some critics say that your novel, *Tales of the Foundation*, is in fact tales of the Akhbar al-Yawm Foundation that you work in. What do you say?" He says, "No, it's much larger than that, and there is no similarity between the foundation in the novel and the Akhbar al-Yawm Foundation."[95] Baudrillard says of seduction that

> it can just as well be a direct fascination with the void, as in the physical vertigo of a chasm, or the metaphorical vertigo of a door that opens onto the void. If you were to see written on a door panel: "This opens on the void." – wouldn't you still want to open it?
> That which looks onto nothing has every reason to be opened. That which doesn't say anything has every reason never to be forgotten. That which is arbitrary is simultaneously endowed with a total necessity. The predestination of the empty sign, the precession of the void, the vertigo of an obligation devoid of sense, a passion for necessity. (1990: 75)

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[95] Available at: www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=19&article=239749&issueno=9333.

Al-Ghitani says that there is nothing there, that *Tales of the Foundation* is hiding nothing, or referring to nothing in the real world. (Of course he says nothing about *Tales of the Treasure Trove*). But doesn't the reader still want to look? These characters are "empty signs," yet out of a "passion for necessity," a closing of signification, and of course for the pleasure of the challenge and the chase, the reader reads on and into and beyond the text. The anonymous narrator tempts us: there are "other hidden affairs" in the Foundation, "whose seals cannot be broken except by direct order of His Excellency … and sometimes, my book" (*T-I*: 230). The author's only entrance into his novel is only to seduce us with more secrets. Aren't we curious?

Who is the Founder? We are drawn into the archives, obsessed with the arbitrary and improbable shreds of evidence that fasten him to the persona and author of Mustafa Amin. Then who is ʿAtiyya Beh, and who is ʿAbdu al-Namarsi? The novel taunts us with elaborate physical descriptions, sheaves of trivia, so we trawl for connections. ʿAbdu al-Namarsi, the pimp and major rival of Fayruz Bahari, "clicks" seductively with Safwat al-Sharif, the former President of Egypt's Upper House of Parliament, which today owns *Akhbar al-Yawm*. In fact, in a tell-all interview to the state-owned newspaper *al-Ahram* in June, 2011, Faruq Husni denied the rumor that he is a homosexual and pointedly blamed Safwat al-Sharif as its ultimate source.[96] But it is a ruse, ʿAbdu al-Namarsi defers signification further, we are certain, surely he is Mamduh al-Lithi, underling of Safwat al-Sharif, and also a pimp and rival of Faruq Husni within the regime. Mamduh al-Lithi, one of Egypt's most infamous scenarists and movie producers, is rumored to have followed al-Sharif in blackmailing actresses with sexual secrets, and turning them into spies. Al-Lithi (*al-līthī*) nearly resembles *al-layth*, "the lion," just as al-Namarsi nearly

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[96] "Faruq Husni li-*Bawwabat al-Ahram*: lastu shadhdhan wa Safwat al-Sharif waraʾ al-shaʾiʿa," *Bawwabat al-Ahram*, June 16, 2011. Available at: http://gate.ahram.org.eg/News/83576.aspx.

resembles *al-nimr*, "the tiger." The novel's physical description fits precisely, too (*T-I*: 141). That which is arbitrary is simultaneously endowed with total necessity.

Who is Zahran al-Husni, the character who serves as a stepping stone for Fayruz Bahari, and is later moved to work in the Cairo suburb of Giza (*T-II*: 185)? Isn't he Zahi Hawwas, former Chief Inspector of the Giza Pyramids Plateau, and caricature of himself in fact as well as fiction? More than anything, we want to know, Who is al-Nabrawi, the capricious figure who vocally protests the ascension of Fayruz Bahari on account of his sexual deviance (*T-II*: 154-155), but then suddenly reverses his position at a packed meeting of a major cultural club (*T-II*: 158-159)? Al-Nabrawi rhymes with ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Sharqawi (1920-1987), one of the most revered littérateurs of Egypt's twentieth century, and author of the novel *Earth* (*al-Ard*, 1954). Indeed al-Sharqawi did vocally opposed Faruq Husni's appointment as Minister of Culture in 1987, before scandalously reversing his position for unknown reasons, and dying a few months later. The novel reveals about al-Nabrawi/al-Sharqawi "what no one else has discovered" (*T-II*: 171): an elaborate story of a lost will, which is thought to prove al-Nabrawi's ownership of the entire Alexandrian shoreline, unfolds over the next several pages. Somehow, Fayruz Bahari promises to help with the legal difficulties so that al-Nabrawi gets his land back (171-176). But before anything else is revealed, al-Nabrawi dies of "an overdose of Viagra" (321), and our sense of curiosity is overwhelmed. We are still seduced: And who is the chief executive? And who is Frédéric, the Frenchman fluent in Arabic, who is encountered sifting through old gramophone records near al-ʿAtaba Square, as he is preparing a doctoral dissertation on antique Egyptian music (278-279)?

By engineering his texts with the mechanisms of seduction – the eclipse of presence, the taunting secrecy – Gamal al-Ghitani reproduces the same factors which led many of his

characters to obsessively speculate over hidden meanings. The pull of seduction is thus the same on these characters as it is on the readers, and we, tantalized by the pleasure of discovery, are interpolated into the practices of gossip and rumormongering that *T-I* and *T-II* perform. We want to know more about the figures al-Ghitani is slandering, if indeed he is slandering them, and pin them down. They are there, then not there, and sometimes, we think we have seized back the meaning and value so devilishly withheld by the gatekeepers of the Foundation and the Treasure Trove.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I began by situating *Tales of the Foundation* and *Tales of the Treasure Trove* in relation to the personal and political life of the author, and went on to propose several readings of these novels as "gossip literature" or, more coarsely, rumormongering. In doing so, I have been treading on dangerous ground. This is not only because the "targets" or intertexts of the novels have been the matter of some dispute, to the extent that they were denied by the author himself. More generally, "serious" literary criticism tends to abhor these kinds of social and political reductions of texts to the immediate experience of their author – in particular when the reading is framed as an investigation into "intentions" and "motives." Not only that, but writing about gossip so easily becomes an act of gossip itself, getting caught up on trivial details and digressing into modes of evaluation and critique that lack any real analytic potency.

Despite the risks of social and political reductionism, an investigation into literature as rumor offers important contributions to the study of cultural politics at the turn of the century. Rumor can reveal the much overlooked narrative intertexts, and psycho-sexual dynamics, that frame and motivate political action for authors, critics, ministers, and academics, however much

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work is done to rationalize and reduce this action to the principles of engagement and critique. Interpreting characters in *T-I* and *T-II* as acquaintances or enemies of the author, I have made three claims about al-Ghitani's art of rumormongering. First, the peculiar caricatural style maintained throughout the novels can be read not just as cheap gossip about Mustafa Amin and his successors, but as a tribute to the unique caricatural style that Amin used and encouraged in *Akhbar al-Yawm*, the sensationalist newspaper he founded with his brother. As an employee of *Akhbar al-Yawm*, al-Ghitani was surely well-acquainted with this style, and found no better way to remember his former employer than to compose a novel in playful imitation. This, of course, does not exculpate the author from the practice of rumormongering, given the many similarities between characters like Fayruz Bahari and real life adversaries. So my second argument was that, if the novels serve as an homage to Amin, they simultaneously perform a critique of Faruq Husni, among others. The specificity of rumor as a political tool – as opposed to objective journalistic reportage, open confrontation, or the literature of *engagement* – may be understood by returning the characters in the novels. It is also a form of *engouement*, of obsession and seduction, as al-Ghitani was irresistibly drawn to challenge the culture czar. Third and finally, I argued that, in addition to their own functioning as rumors, *T-I* and *T-II* seduce the reader into the practice of speculative rumormongering, fueling a desire for more information about the likes of Fayruz Bahari/Faruq Husni, al-Nabrawi/ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Sharqawi, and ʿAbdu al-Namarsi/Mamduh al-Lithi.

It becomes difficult, after conducting readings of the personalities depicted in the novels, to accept al-Ghitani's own denial about the personal and political targets they engage. Of course we should not expect anyone to confess to participating in this stigmatized discursive practice, unless he thinks he can get away with it. I would suggest that the stigma of the practice is what

drove al-Ghitani to write these novels in the first place: he can claim, as he does, that this is the "high" art of the novel rather than the "low" art of gossip. By placing the rumors and scandalous reports in the mouths of his characters, the author would seem to distance himself yet further from them. Ultimately, however, it is not my intent to catch al-Ghitani, the man, in a dubious act: literature, no less than the everyday gestures and speech acts performed over coffee dregs and half-serious cigarettes, allows us to read and write complexity; it is an opportunity for suspending the critical urge, to allow things to say something new, to experiment with alternatives. That is to say, the rumormonger is not summoned here to be put on trial, for that work, as the reader has seen and will see again, has already been done.

"FLIRTING" WITH RUMORS: PLAY, PARODY, AND POLITICS IN CYBERSPACE

> Among the Egyptians' most distinguishing traits in the modern era is the spirit of humor transmitted in their everyday conversations. They are passionately fond of joking about everything and everyone. In the most awkward and sensitive moments, the ray of humor quickly breaks forth, shining splendid on their faces … Sit among any gathering of Egyptians, or in any cafe – especially the popular-class cafes, where both workers and those without work gather – and you will find humor rolling on every tongue. (Dayf 2010: i)

Shawqi Dayf (1910-2005), one of the twentieth century's most distinguished scholars of classical and premodern Arabic literatures, writes these words in his introduction to a work of fifteenth-century burlesque. He is transmitting a notion with wide circulation in the Arab World that a peculiar "spirit of humor" (*rūḥ al-fukāha*) pervades the manners and customs of modern Egyptians, a "people of jokes" (*shaʿb nukta*) whose sanguinary wit and gay repartees serve them well in times mottled with contradiction and adversity. Re-inscribing a primordial link between a particular speech genre and an entire people, this notion might be interpreted as the brighter inflection of those comments with which I introduced this dissertation. Just as Egypt has been said to be a "country of rumors," so Egyptians are said to be a "people of jokes." If the former claim is deployed as polemic and lament, the latter lends itself more often to expressions of national pride, while also serving to rank, dismiss, or exclude the popular classes from more "serious" matters both aesthetic and political. In Dayf's case, the expression comes close to an apology for the licentiousness and colloquial style of the book he is introducing, preempting objections from the more orthodox custodians of the Arabic literary canon.

National stereotypes aside, Dayf's remarks allow us to consider the principle object of this dissertation in a different light: holding up the "rumor" (*al-ishāʿa*) next to the "joke" (*al-*

nukta) reveals important points of comparison. How are we to separate the two as popular speech genres? Must we separate them? The similarities are certainly many: both are typically transmitted orally, or through a mix of media; they are rather difficult to define conceptually, both for their capricious genre hopping and multiplicity of styles and sub-species; both are often anonymous, with transmitters, tellers, and performers but few identifiable authors; both are eagerly consumed, hoarded and exchanged as ready social capital; both would seem to possess "magical circulatory virtues" and are captured through similar metaphors of diffusion and irruption; they are received through similar standards of evaluation (conciseness, timing, novelty, and "accuracy" – they "hit the mark"). Finally, while both may be cast as typical of "Egyptians" in general, they are in many senses illicit, not only through their association with the lower classes, internal others, and similar spaces of sociality (the cafe), but also for their widely acknowledged subversive potential. Whether consciously launched against an individual target, or conducive to a general atmosphere of resistance and confusion, jokes and rumors possess an inflammatory irreverence that threatens, but at many times reproduces, the would-be order of things. Certainly from the perspective of the powerful, the two have often been grouped together among the signs of popular discontent that need to be monitored, recorded, analyzed, classified, combated, and punished.[97]

It is no wonder that many academic studies of rumor have been unable to avoid noting areas of conceptual overlap with popular forms of humor. Allport and Postman (1947), for example, observed early on that "[in] the manner in which they circulate and in the function they serve, jokes and rumors are often surprisingly similar," as both generate "emotional catharsis" and may be "equally unfair and unjust to their victims" (192-193). And while they are able to

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[97] An early example in Egypt of the state's surveillance of both "jokes" and "gossip," during the reign of Ismail Pasha (r. 1863-1879), is discussed by Colla (2011).

draw a basic distinction between the two forms on the basis of the receiver's assumption of "verifiable evidence," they admit that there remain many cases of ambiguity, such as "hostility rumors that are wittily cast" and "tendentious anecdotes that are merely humorous" (193). Drawing the conceptual lines somewhat differently, Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa (1964) posits the joke as a distinct form that nonetheless can serve as an "unconventional medium" for rumor. In such cases, the humorous "exterior" is crafted by an enemy rumormonger to transmit a gravely dangerous "interior," likened to "poison" because it is not detected in the act of consumption. Kapferer (1990), in contrast, focuses not on any formal distinctions between speech genres but on the intentional activities of social actors themselves. A single rumor, for instance, may have both "passive relays," "instigators," and "opportunists" – each engaging the story with his or her own degree of credulity and commitment – or it may have what he calls "flirters" – those who pass on a rumor they know to be false or improbable for comic effect, or to "*play* with them … enjoying ruffling their public's feathers" (96-97; my emphasis). Ultimately, locating such elements of humor within rumor's chain is important, in that it complicates theories of rumor that deem "belief" or credulity as essential to transmission. These theories – implicit in attempts by state actors to "combat rumors" – have so often been used as evidence of the "naïveté" of the masses: in Shaykh Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi's words, *al-umam al-sādhija*, the "gullible" or "naïve" nations (2001: 8). Kapferer's distinctions, in particular, help us understand that social actors transmit *ishāʿāt* to pursue divergent personal or political aims, through differing epistemological or affective modalities, degrees of attention, and measures of agency. In other words, rumor needs not always be a "proposition for belief" as in Allport and Postman's classic formulation – quite often it is a suggestion for relief, shot through with a heavy dose of laughter.[98]

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[98] "How strongly must people believe a rumor before we call it a rumor?" The question is posed by Fine, Campion-

Part 3 investigates some of the ways in which the coil of rumor becomes wrapped up in modalities and performances of humor, generating innovative cultural forms with a political edge. Chapter 7 investigates humorous rumormongering as a kind of "play," which reveals the affirmative potential that *al-ishāʿa* is often denied. Chapter 8 investigates how a form of humor, which I theorize as "parody," is deployed *against* a certain strand of rumors. In both cases, the ethics and politics of noise, and the ethics and politics of the response, are central to these historic moments of transformation, evolution, and revolution.

Vincent, and Heath in concluding their anthology on rumors, as a suggestion for future research (2005: 256).

Chapter 7: "Mubarak Has Died": Rumor as Play in the Egyptian Blogosphere (2008-2010)

In this chapter, I follow the online campaign "Mubarak Mat": a coterie of bloggers, graphic artists, musicians, and Facebook users who staged the president's passing in various forms beginning in 2008. These actors can be understood as rumor "flirters" to use Kapferer's felicitous phrase, a concept I would like to refine with theoretical insights from the study of play (Bakhtin 1984; Barthes 1989; Freud 1983; Huizinga 1955; Turner 1982). As "play," rumormongering in this case engenders a carnival spirit of the "as if," both experimenting with and actually enacting a counter-hegemonic scenario of a post-Mubarak Egypt that, while performed in a ritually circumscribed space and time (the "blogosphere"), nonetheless promises to exceed these bounds to create more lasting effects. Although these artists deliberately cultivate a self-serving fiction through the socially stigmatized form of rumor, they nonetheless expose the artifice and contingency of their own work through irony and expressions of self-reflexivity. In this way, such playful rumormongering differs from the more malicious acts performed by the likes of ʿAtiyya Beh and Gamal al-Ghitani (Part 2), as well as the official lies and myths that they seek to replace. By following "Mubarak Mat," then, I emphasize the affirmative, rather than destructive, functions of rumor in Egyptian public culture. In addition, by giving more weight to the political effectiveness of this performance, I seek to counter the more pessimistic strain in the scholarship on sub-cultures, hypertext, and blogging that dismisses such practices as largely complicit, contained, or always already "incorporated" within the dominant structures of power.

I begin by revisiting the circumstances of the Mubarak death rumors of 2007, which I discussed from the perspective of state actors in Chapter 3. My aim in this first section is to

situate "Mubarak Mat" in relation to this chain of hearsay, and emphasize its difference from previous contributions, notably the texts of Ibrahim ʿIsa. In addition, I use segments from ʿIsa's novel *The Murder of the Big Man* (1999) as a historical document that accurately describes the power of Mubarak's "myth of permanence": the narrative against which the later blogging campaign would be launched. I then turn to the performance itself, and trace its different mutations across cyberspace.

Intertexts: The Myth of Permanence and Fantasies of Resistance

> Everyone around the president feared his departure or death after thirty-two years in power. People had come to trust that the world stood on the horns of a bull, and that the nation rested on the shoulders of the leader. If he died, grew weary, or just gave up, the country would surely perish. It would fall apart, collapse. He was the only one they had known as president or as leader, and they could simply not imagine the country going on without him. [They could not imagine] waking up in the morning, without finding him on the television screen or the front page of the national newspapers, without his statues on the main roads and his color portraits on the side streets, without his speeches on the radio, without celebrating his birthday, or praying for him on Friday and the anniversary of his ascension to the presidential throne. (ʿIsa 1999: 65-66)

Published at personal expense and impounded upon release in 1999, Ibrahim ʿIsa's novel *The Murder of the Big Man* (*Maqtal al-Ragul al-Kabir*) is a salacious political thriller that penetrates into the lurid corruption, and mysterious assassination, of a Middle Eastern head of state. While set in the future and shy on names, its contemporary, real world references are boldly transparent: the "big man" of the novel has been president for decades, and while he boasts of perfect health and sexual prowess, there is a barely suppressed succession crisis in which his son features as a major contender.

In the passage above, ʿIsa identifies in only slightly exaggerated terms the iconic infrastructure of Mubarak's power. As a supplement to his regime's systematic abuse of force –

the notorious Emergency Laws, the entrenchment of the military in all sectors of society, the widely documented police brutality, and the hiring of street thugs (*balṭagiyya*) – in addition to a fuliginous network of international financial connections – not the least of which was an annual aid package of several billion dollars from the United States – Mubarak also projected his authority through a proliferation of public symbols and performances. These were interwoven with a reigning narrative of the president as the "Hero of the Crossing" and "Engineer of the Air Strike" – in reference to his alleged leading role in the 1973 war with Israel – as well as "father" to all Egyptians. Such symbolic buttresses to power, however, did not need to be entirely convincing to be effective. Indeed Mubarak's would-be personality cult was infelicitous from act one, given his widely perceived mediocrity in comparison to his two predecessors; by the final decade of his rule, his public portraits had succumbed to sun bleaching, his billboards had descended into kitsch, and the man himself began to recede further from public view. What held the entire artifice of power together in the symbolic realm was, perhaps, more the result of *in*action than any intentional plan: Mubarak stayed put. The sheer number of years he had accumulated in office, as well as his survival of numerous assassination attempts – including one by knife just a few months after a similar scenario was envisioned in ʿIsa's novel – were the crucial facts that tied together the myth of the president's inevitability, immortality, and irreplaceability. Simply put, this powerful myth meant that many "could simply not imagine" an Egypt without Mubarak.

The potency of this myth, and its pallid reiterations at multiple levels of public culture, must be grasped if we are to understand the subversive potential of a performance like "Mubarak Mat" (and, of course, the transgression of a novel like *The Murder of the Big Man*). For President Mubarak's permanence was not just a tired rhetorical trope delivered by stolid officials

in state media to an un-captive audience. For many, it would seem to set a tone for an entire era, instilling a sense of *waqf* or "blockage" at each of life's intersections, in traffic, in bureaucracy, in employment, in self-expression and self-realization. Monotony dug itself in at the level of the everyday, and could also be read in the catatonic demeanors of an octogenarian political class, the high-register language of state newspapers which continued unchanged for decades and, for many members of a younger generation, an overmuch bemoaned mixture of *malal* ("boredom"), *khanʾa* ("suffocation") and *biḍān* ("bollocks").[99] If Mubarak's permanence was imagined, it had tangible effects, and if it was clearly a myth, it succeeded in chasing out most others.

It was not, of course, invincible. ʿIsa's novel, though banned, circulated underground for years as if it were rumor itself, until ultimately becoming available publically at newsstands and bookstores around 2006. We may thus read it as an early stab at the fiction of the immortal president; a second stab came with the death rumors of August and September of 2007. ʿIsa was involved here too, and if he was no more than a convenient scapegoat, the transgressive potential of his words cannot be missed. Voices scattered throughout *The Murder of the Big Man* tell us as much, with allusions to the murderous force of language. The Minister of Information, one of the many regime cronies whose conversations we eavesdrop on, remarks at one point that he "really felt the president had died when the prime minister managed to insult him" (88). Later, the narrator tells us that "the people – truly – performed the president's funeral (*shayyaʿ al-raʾīs*) with jokes that multiplied and burst like bubbles in a lake atop a ready-to-erupt volcano" (143). The word *shayyaʿ* ("to perform the funeral rites") is from the same root as *ishāʿa*, rendering "rumor" *the* tool of character and corporeal assassination. Moreover, the president's death, after taking a final dip in his swimming pool which was poisoned by an unknown engineer, can be

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[99] In Egyptian Colloquial Arabic, the last two terms, *khanʾa* and *biḍān*, are often deployed in (youth) slang as emotive ejaculations, indexing frustration, disgust, etc. See below my discussion of a7a.

read in the same way: "poison" has a long tradition of association with rumor and subversive speech, from Hamlet's father (killed by "poison in the ear") to Muhammad Talʿat ʿIsa's *Confronting Rumors*. Here, the president has not only caught poisonous discourse in his ear, but has literally drowned in it. It is not difficult to imagine ʿIsa, in writing this rumor-novel, as this anonymous poisoner whose words can kill. More than simply passing on popular speech, he is able to position himself – in a self-effacing manner, tagged with the hearty guffaw of a yellow journalist – as regicide, as the individual intending agent who introduces the poisoning substance at the appropriate time and place. He signs his name on this act, and comes away with the fantasy that his words have obtained deadly perlocutionary force.

But could such lone acts of discursive sabotage really have an effect? Could yellow fantasy and rumors really challenge dictatorship, or did they merely scratch superficially at an edifice of authority whose stability had endured for a quarter-century? Worse, might such acts help to re-inscribe this very authority, by agreeing to its terms and figurations? Might they not also sour the already poisoned public sphere, by departing dangerously into fiction and fantasy? Not long after the trial of Ibrahim ʿIsa in September, 2007, such questions posed themselves again when events materialized "on the ground" that presaged a "real" revolution. In early April of 2008, an uprising in the industrial cities of the Delta reawoke memories of the Bread Riots of 1977, a spontaneous revolt of hundreds of thousands against the neo-liberal economic policies of Anwar Sadat. The new uprising – which included strikes, sit-ins, and rioting, and was fought by the regime with mass arrests, torture, and disappearances – was similarly historic in scale, presenting an unprecedented challenge to the regime of Husni Mubarak and his myth of permanence; and yet, the events were largely overlooked by major international media outlets, certainly when compared to the coverage afforded both to the Bread Riots of 1977, and the

Revolution of 25 January. Instead, they were documented closely by *mudawwinūn*, "bloggers" – a word, less an identifiable group, which was at this time gaining new currency in local and regional Arabic mass media, and whose precise meaning and place vis-à-vis the recognized fields of culture and politics became subject to renewed contest, and propelled often grandiose statements couched in a language of "the new" and "the revolutionary." An Al-Jazeera documentary appeared in late April, and heralded Arabic bloggers as "the new journalists" for their role in exposing police brutality and covering demonstrations and strikes such as those which had begun earlier in the month in al-Mahalla al-Kubra.[100] The Facebook group and would-be revolutionary organization Shabab 6 Abril ("The Youth of 6 April") – which would later play an important role in mobilizing the demonstrations of January 25, 2011 – was also launched at this time in solidarity with the struggle of the striking workers.

Just as the death rumors of 2007 had opened a vent for the expression of popular hopes of a post-Mubarak future, so did this uprising inspire new dreams and fantasies about the revolution to come. In addition, just as some had worried that the death rumors (and Ibrahim ʿIsa's role in them), even if the scenario they proposed was ideal, might be unhelpful fictions and self-defeating talk, so was concern expressed that many of the bursts of imagination and political projects expressed in cyberspace during the uprising were veering too far from reality. This concern – that fantasy talk in the virtual world might damage the revolution's chances – sparked a heated debate among strike supporters on the division of revolutionary labor between "internet activists" sitting at home in Cairo and factory workers battling police "on the ground" in the Delta. These were the terms invoked by Hossam el-Hamalawy – a veteran activist and journalist whose blog "3arabawy" has chronicled workers' movements in the Egypt and around the world

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[100] Al-Jazeera, "Taḥt al-Mijhar: al-Mudawwinūn: al-Ṣuḥufiyyūn al-Judud," available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfEgQyOGT7A.

since 2006 – in a post written on April 27, a few weeks after State Security violently suppressed the protests in al-Mahalla al-Kubra. Taking account of the recent events and their coverage in the media, el-Hamalawy compared those who entertain "cyber-fantasies" with the socialists who fostered connections "ON THE GROUND" – a phrase thrice-repeated in capital letters. He was not criticizing internet-bound imagination or play as such, only those users that deluded themselves and others into thinking their call for a strike on April 6 (and later, on May 4) would translate directly into revolution without further work. Addressing fellow bloggers, he concluded:

> What we are doing is making fools out of ourselves, destroy[ing] our credibility, confirm[ing] [the] stereotype about bloggers being "IT nerds who sit in front of their computer screens and live in virtual reality" remote from what goes on in the street… and caus[ing] demoralization among our supporters…

El-Hamalawy's unfavorable contrast of "on the ground" activists with "IT nerds" expresses the anxiety that digressions in the "virtual" may interfere with serious political work. "Cyber-fantasies," such as calls for strikes that never materialized, or political groupings that didn't represent anyone, were essentially parasitic, a kind of noise that was undermining the real plans put forward by more committed activists. Thus the perennial debate between the affirmative and destructive functions of *parasite*, of rumor and fiction, unfolded again, now in the domain of the virtual.[101]

Fantasies of resistance, both online and in the street, flourished during the events of April 2008. What is more, the protests of al-Mahalla al-Kubra and their suppression happened to come just before the 80th birthday of President Mubarak on May 4. The date would provide an opportunity for the re-articulation of Mubarak's myth of permanence in state media and

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[101] Armbrust (2007), too, has called attention to debates on a "new(er) medium's [such as blogging] capacity to promote political change, or … to construct a democratic public sphere or to undermine it" (532).

presidential ritual, while also allowing opponents to counter the *khanʿa* and oppression of several decades by taking aim at this iconic lynchpin of dictatorship. For many, to use Ibrahim ʿIsa's words, this would be an occasion to "perform the president's funeral (*shayyaʿ al-raʾīs*)" through the sundry artistic techniques available to them: crafted and deployed from the rims, verges and crenellates of an emergent counter-culture, and inscribed with a style and an attitude which while "revolutionary," would cut against the grain of conventional "resistance." Moreover, while departing into the virtual and the imaginary, many of these performances would remain self-consciously grounded in the world of the possible, which they were rapidly redefining.

An exemplary expression of such techniques can be found in the virtual campaign "Mubarak has Died" ("Mubarak Mat"), which began with a semi-anonymous song of that name presented as a "birthday present" to the President of the Republic. The song first circulated in mid-April on blogs and Facebook walls, at once joining in the chorus of discontent with the long rule of the soon-to-be octogenarian, and reviving the rumors of the previous fall (August-September 2007) by means of a contagious artistic performance – one that would quickly migrate into other virtual genres and modes of expression. The song with which the "campaign" was launched was performed by the pseudonymous trio Butrus, Bulus, and Maria ("Peter, Paul, and Mary"), and was first uploaded to the website "archive.org," a popular open-source depository for books, articles, music, and other media. It would subsequently be posted on a number of prominent and loosely affiliated Egyptian blogs, including "Manal and Alaa's bit bucket," Hossam el-Hamalawy's "3arabawy," Ahmed Naje's "Wassaʿ Khayalak" ("Widen your Imagination"), and Issandr El Amrani's "the Arabist," in addition to any number of Facebook

walls.[102] Different users of these sites subsequently "played" the song in their own way, whether through commentaries, graphic images, or just silent humming. Not merely a "cyber-fantasy" in el-Hamalawy's sense, nor simply complicit in the myth of the patriarch, "Mubarak has Died" remixes the rumors through what I will theorize as "play" (*liʿb*): a subjunctive and self-effacing aesthetic mode with a transformative force exceeding its ostensible temporal and spatial limits.

Playing with Rumors

"Play" is a polyvalent term in Western philosophy and social theory, where it has been alternately posited as a special mode of human action (Freud 1983; Huizinga 1955; Turner 1982), or implicated more abstractly in processes of linguistic and textual signification (e.g. Barthes 1989). The latter tradition, developed within Continental philosophy, can provide important insight – especially Barthes' notion of play as "interpretation" and the readerly reproduction of the text. However, I begin this section by engaging with those theories of play grounded in some understanding of the social world, embodied action, or human history, which is where such performances as we will study actually occur, generate meaning, and call for attention. In addition, an important task in Arab cultural studies, as Tarik Sabry has argued, is the building of "epistemic connectivity" (2012: 4) between Arab and non-Arab intellectual traditions. To this end, I engage with local understandings of "play" (*liʿb*) – primarily the writings of Ahmed Naje – which, ultimately, have more claim to the interpretation of performances in the Egyptian blogosphere than Eurocentric philosophy.

Many modern social scientific studies of play refer back to the work of Johan Huizinga (1955), whose theoretical speculations built on the everyday meaning of the term. For Huizinga,

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[102] The original song is available at: archive.org/details/MubarakIsDead_284. For subsequent postings, see: manalaa.net/mubarak_is_dead ("Manal and Alaa's bit bucket"), www.arabawy.org/2008/04/20/mubarak_ma/ (el-Hamalawy's "3arabawy"), and ahmednaje.net/2008/4/19 (Ahmed Naje's "Wassaʿ Khayalak").

play could be observed in animals as well as human beings, but his interest lay exclusively in its "cultural" functions: play was to be studied "as a special form of activity, as a 'significant form,' as a social function" (4). While "free," it should not be considered frivolous, and while "standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious'," it absorbs the player "intensely and utterly" (13). Finally, while circumscribed in a special, even sacred space within a limited temporal frame, "with the end of the play its effect is not lost; rather it continues to shed its radiance on the ordinary world outside" (14). Other aspects which Huizinga deemed crucial – secrecy, disinterestedness, order and rules – have less relevance to a performance such as "Mubarak has Died." What concerns us here is its epistemic modality (its conscious departure from reality), spatial dimensions (where it takes place), and transformative potential (its political edge), all of which Turner (1982) takes up in his consideration of the liminal phase of ritual performance. Ritual, according to Turner, often involves a temporary move from the "indicative" mood characteristic of ordinary life – glossed as a prevailing attitude of "actual fact" and serious intentionality – into a "subjunctive" mood of "as if" – understood as action concerned with "wish, desire, possibility, or hypothesis" (82-83). Like Huizinga's play, the subjunctive mood of ritual is consciously not serious, and its performance is separated in time and space (in a "liminal" zone) from the indicative everyday. And yet, with the end of the ritual, and the "move… from the '*subjunctive*' mood back to the '*indicative*' mood," the "recovered mood has now been tempered, even transformed, by immersion in subjunctivity" (82). That is, the play ceases but, as Huizinga argued, it "continues to shed its radiance" on the indicative or ordinary world. Ritual – or, in our preferred term, play – would be a kind of experimentation with alternative presents and futures, consciously removed from "reality" but ultimately

encroaching on it through a tactical exploitation of the possible, the suppressed, the discarded, and the grotesque.

Freud, while not fully articulating this transformative potential of play beyond its own imaginative confines, nonetheless argues that the player "rearranges the things of his world in a way which pleases him." He does this, however, not through a flight into the frivolous but by "linking" his "imagined objects and situations to the tangible and visible things of the real world." For Freud, this "linking" is what separates mere "fantasying" from the more serious "play" (1983: 25). It is also what separates a campaign like "Mubarak Mat" – a playful performance grounded in potentials and aware of its own contingency – from what Hossam el-Hamalawy called "cyber-fantasies" – dangerous acts attached to the impossible through self-delusion. Yet it is necessary to add that if such play is to enact its potentials, and succeed in its transformative force, it must also recognize that Freud's "real world" or some aspect of it is transitory, contingent, and replaceable. To use Turner's terms, the players must recognize that the "indicative" or ordinary world is just another version of the "subjunctive," a ritualistic mode not to be taken as permanent, immortal, or entirely serious. Through play, the realm of the possible is expanded.

To fully appreciate the aesthetics and ontology of play, however, we must not fail to draw out the humorous streak which pervades it in many cases. Here the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin on medieval laughter offer invaluable insight. He contrasts the "official and authoritarian" nature of "the serious aspects of class culture," and its "element of fear and intimidation," with the liberating power of folk laughter (1984: 90). His words deserve quoting in full:

> Through this victory laughter clarified man's consciousness and gave him a new outlook
> on life. This truth was ephemeral; it was followed by the fears and oppressions of

everyday life, but from these brief moments another unofficial truth emerged, truth about the world and man which prepared the new Renaissance consciousness (91)

Medieval folk laughter, then, not only subverted the official truth, but offered up its own alternative. And while this alternative "unofficial truth" was "ephemeral" and limited – like Huizinga's play and Turner's ritual – in time and space, it served the important function of "preparing" its participants for what Bakhtin calls "the new Renaissance consciousness." In other words, it would make possible a revolutionary new configuration of culture and politics, in which the ludic and the carnivalesque would escape their proletarian confines and suffuse "high" literature, as generic boundaries of all kinds crumbled (72). With such lyrical optimism, Bakhtin, perhaps, was less concerned about making a positivistic historical argument than he was launching an assault on the high seriousness of the Soviet state in his own times; his celebration of folk laughter may indeed have been his own experimentation with alternatives, his own act of "play." This does not make his theory of laughter any less relevant to contemporary culture. Its restoration of a transformative, consciousness-making role to the ludic is important given the frequent dismissals of such forms as frivolous. Finally, Bakhtin observes folk laughter to be "universal," both in its all-inclusive nature and its selection of targets: no one, not even the performers themselves, is safe from its ravages. It thus includes an important self-reflexive function that prevents it becoming, like the governing "serious" ideologies, hegemonic and exclusionary. It is saved from descending into Freud's pathological "fantasying."

The ordinary semantic field of the Arabic *li'b* differs little from that of the English "play." In fact Huizinga did not fail to include Semitic languages in his chapter on "The Play-Concept in Language," and made the observation that "in Arabic and Syriac the same root serves for the dribbling and drooling of a baby (to be understood, perhaps, from its habit of blowing

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bubbles with spit, which can confidently be taken as a form of play)" (35). He was referring to the Arabic word *luʿāb* or "saliva," which is not, as the passage would seem to suggest, the exclusive plaything of infants. The thrust of such remarks, in the end, is to exaggerate in a classical philological manner the otherness of Arabic against the ordinariness of the Indo-European. A more local sense of *liʿb* is to be found not in etymological play; rather, the true theoretical and semantic value of the term can best be sought by tracing its movement in context – that is, in the special "space" that Huizinga, Turner, and to a lesser extent Bakhtin deem necessary to the unfolding of play.

What, then, is the special space, or "playground," of "Mubarak Mat"? Arabic terms, and their English approximates, such as *al-faḍāʾ al-iftirāḍī* ("cyberspace," literally "virtual-space") or *al-faḍāʾ al-saybarī* ("cyberspace"), are too wide to designate this area. "The (Egyptian/Arab) blogosphere," or *faḍāʾ al-tadwīn* (*al-maṣrī/al-ʿarabī*), comes closer. It is a contested space, with different frames deployed to grasp it, whether from within – through aggregators, histories, or political campaigns[103] – or from without – through maps, documentaries, or policing and torture[104]. It is not always or exclusively a space of play: networks overlap with networks, as they do with the "real" world political struggles they help mediate. In some corners of the Egyptian blogosphere, one is more aware of flows and connections to the wider material-semiotic fields of commerce, consumer culture, national politics, and religion. However, in others, the element of play is unmistakable: a density of hyperlinks and character work gives the feel of a more local, close-knit community or *shilla* ("small group" or "gang"); symbols and discourse point to themselves; inside-humor takes shape; and a more nuanced if still imperfect

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[103] Respectively, the aggregator "Omraneya" (http://www.omraneya.net/); and Naje (2010), a history of the Arab blogosphere, including a review of attempts to politicize bloggers along traditional partisan lines.
[104] Respectively, Etling, et. al. (2009), a statistical study published by Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society; "al-Mudawwinun," a documentary by al-Jazeera (n. 4); and the Egyptian regime's numerous arrests of bloggers.

comprehensibility between members comes together. In fact at the very moment of entry, there is no avoiding the mood of "as if," as one has to choose a new name, an avatar, a distinctive persona.[105]

Blogging as *liʿb* – and the blogosphere as *malʿab* ("playground," or athletic "arena") – is a notion most clearly articulated by Ahmed Naje in his blog "Wassaʿ Khayalak" ("Widen your Imagination"[106]). Naje, who is also a novelist, literary journalist, and "historian" (*muʾarrikh*) of the Egyptian blogosphere, has often in his posts displayed the eccentricity, perversion, and tactical irony of a trickster – a posture expressed in the blog's slogan, *ʿīsh kaʾinnak tilʿab!* ("Live as if you're playing!"). *Liʿb*, a term dropped sporadically by Naje but never explicitly given definition, would be both action and attitude, associated with equally elastic words like *mutʿa* ("pleasure"), *fann* ("art"), and *khayāl* ("imagination"), and contrasted unfavorably with *malal* ("boredom"), *burjuwāziyya* ("bourgeois/conventional lifestyle"), or even *ʿaṭan* ("putridness") and *ruṭūba* ("humidity") – in other words, the reigning affective states of Mubarak's regime. The contrast between *liʿb* and the ordinary can also be understood as the contrast between *ḥītān* ("whales") and *ḥīṭān* ("walls"), two metaphors that Naje often invokes but never explicitly juxtaposes: the former signifying a ludic, post-human freestyle, and the latter, dichotomous rigidities of all sorts. None of this means that *liʿb* is merely frivolous; quite the contrary, it is invested with transgressive and transformative potential. This message is delivered clearly by Naje in a post from July, 2006, refuting Hezbollah's invocation of the word "resistance" (*muqāwama*) during its war with Israel. "Resistance" for Hezbollah, as well as for many other Islamist and Arab nationalist movements, has been narrowly interpreted as only armed struggle. Naje responds:

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[105] See Al-Ghadeer (2011) on bloggers as fictional personas.

[106] The phrase *wassaʿ khayālak* could also mean "widen your shadow," i.e. "live large." Naje also uses *khayāl* in the sense of *khayāl al-ẓill*, the medieval Arabic tradition of shadow puppetry.

The mother that reads a story to her child: this is resistance [*muqāwama*]. Building a small house: this is resistance. Singing at night is resistance. Having sex is resistance. Resistance is not just bearing arms; it is also the ability to adhere to the virtue of play [*faḍīlat al-liʿb*] and to relentlessly pursue the pleasures of life.

Play or *liʿb*, in other words, is posited as an alternative to armed resistance and ideological commitment – that is, politics (and aesthetics) by conventional means. It unfolds as a release from grand narratives, while sticking out its tongue at those who take themselves too seriously. It also cuts ironically at itself, claiming the self-righteous status of "virtue" (*faḍīla*) that it can only pronounce with tongue in cheek.

Crucially, too, Naje's writings give us a sense of how the blogosphere – the *malʿab* or "playground"[107] – is "staked out" to use Huizinga's words: it enjoys a kind of "sacred space, a temporarily real world of its own … expressly hedged off for it" (14). This spatial work is often performed in reaction to external claims made on the blogosphere, usually by mainstream media pundits or politicians, as merely an appendage to conventional ideological battles and commitments. Such was the case of an Al-Jazeera documentary produced on "Bloggers without Borders" in September, 2006. To this, Naje responded: "Blogs have been able to enjoy a space of play [*masāḥa min al-liʿb*] free from the demands of politics and the media – this is, until Al-Jazeera came out with this 'bomb' or fierce goosing [*baʿbūṣ*] for reasons that remain unclear." This is not to deny that blogging can have any politics, or that play in *al-malʿab* is to be denied any transformative influence on the outside world. Rather, this spatial independence is necessary to sustain the mood of "as if" in which different roles and scenarios for the present and future can be tried out, free from the constraints of society's dominant myths and hegemonic seriousness. Nor does "staking out" such a space necessarily involve exclusion. The few that are explicitly

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[107] See also Naje (2010: 30) for an explicit reference to the blogosphere as *al-malʿab*.

excluded – such as the nonagenarian journalist, former confidant of President Nasser, and current Al-Jazeera pundit Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal – are done so not on the basis of age or even technological illiteracy, but because of their inability to acknowledge or participate in the play element in the blogosphere.[108]

The Song

From within this *malʿab* – the Egyptian blogosphere – the artists behind "Mubarak Mat" play with rumors of the president's death. This begins with a song of that name, to which we now turn. Through a multi-layered musical parody, the artists perform a transgressive fiction, cutting down Mubarak's myth of permanence while also laughing at the potential infelicity of their own performance. The song opens with an announcement read by an exaggeratedly deep and slow male voice:

> *ayyuhā al-muwāṭinūn*
>
> Citizens!
>
> *laqad faqada al-waṭanu ragulan min ashgaʿ al-rigāl, ragulan min arṣan al-rigāl*
>
> The nation has lost a man, one of the most courageous men, one of the strongest men,
>
> *ragulan ʿurifa bi-mawāqifih, wa kāna bashar*
>
> A man who was known for his positions, and was all but human.

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[108] In this corner of the Egyptian blogosphere, Haykal often features as a sort of viagrated dinosaur whose frequent pronouncements on blogging are helplessly out of touch with reality. See, for example, any of Naje's posts on Haykal (July 1, 2009; June, 18, 2011). It is understood that Haykal, in any case, already enjoys his own "virtual playground" as performed in his numerous memories and books on modern Egyptian history, which are often criticized for their self-indulgent departure from reality.

Such is the high-register, grandiose rhetoric of state news broadcasts, forged in the radio announcements and communiques of the 1950s and dominant ever since, and whose tropic introduction was always *ayyuhā al-muwāṭinūn*, "O Citizens!" But the resonance in this case is more specific. These were the approximate words with which Anwar Sadat somberly announced to the nation the sudden passing of President Nasser on September 28, 1970. "Mubarak Mat" parodies this memorable broadcast for an obvious effect: the legendary figure of Nasser towers over the rather mediocre Mubarak; it is a juxtaposition often performed in popular jokes.[109] Mubarak's ineloquence, grammatical mistakes, lack of a redeeming ideological vision like Arab nationalism or anti-imperialism, and failure to leave his developmental imprint on Egypt, are the most oft-cited marks of his ineffectual leadership, indeed personal blandness, when compared to his predecessors. The song brings these contrasts into relief by mimicking the form of the famous announcement made in 1970.

The Sadat-like voice continues, announcing the closure of the many public buildings and foundations that bear the president's name, before adding that *sa-yakhlufu mubārak mubārak* ("Mubarak will succeed Mubarak") – a confirmation of the popular fear that the president's son Gamal was being groomed to replace him. Next, a hiss of static transitions to the voices of the three musicians who take over for the remainder of the song. The lead singer, accompanied by banjo and harmonica, begins:

> *mubārak māt, mubārak māt*
>
> Mubarak has died, Mubarak has died
>
> *ʾākhir khabar fi r-rādiyuhāt*

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[109] Nasser had defiantly said to the forces of colonialism, "Choke on your own rage." Sadat had famously said, "I am prepared to speak in the Knesset." Mubarak had famously said, "Present, sir," when called upon at his trial.

The latest news on the radio

wa fī sh-shawāriʿ wa l-maṣāniʿ wa l-ḥawāri wa l-bārāt

And in the streets, and the factories, and the alleys, and the bars

mubārak māt

Mubarak has died

For those familiar with Egyptian popular music, these lines are instantly recognizable as a tip of the hat to the song "Jifara Mat" ("Guevara Has Died"), written by popular poet Ahmad Fuʾad Nigm (b. 1929) and performed by singer Shaykh Imam (1918-1995) in the late 1960s. Again, the death of Mubarak is juxtaposed ironically with the death of a great political and culture legend – here it is Che Guevara who, like Nasser, was for millions truly a figure to be mourned. Next to the lionized revolutionary, the president – complicit, according to popular opinion, in neo-liberal and imperialist schemes – comes off as a pathetic competitor for popular grief. Yet while both these opening parodies conspire to degrade Mubarak's stature through comparison with a grander deceased figure, they differ in one very important aspect: the figure of the mourner. The duo Nigm and Imam, with their history of opposition to political and cultural authoritarianism in Egypt, are an unlikely pair to be lamenting the president, and their invocation here departs far into the absurd. But the parodic positioning of Sadat as Mubarak's mourner, while anachronistic, is at least a plausible scenario: one might very well expect a dictator to mourn a dictator. It would be a truly dark scenario, and it is not difficult to catch the cynicism about the post-Mubarak period spoken in these lines. It would appear that after nearly a half-century of political and ideological evolution around the world, and decades of linguistic and cultural innovation such as the very performances of these bloggers, the state has nonetheless

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chugged along with the same register of Arabic, the same forms of address, and the same modes and genres of communication it has used since the days of radio and print. Despite the death of Mubarak, the old monotony of the regime – transparently hollow and lacking in signification for a new generation who is the majority – continues as if nothing had happened. There is no recognition that the address *ayyuhā al-muwāṭinūn* has long failed to "hail," in the classic Althusserian sense, any real citizen subjects. And just as language has not changed, so has the structure of dictatorship remained firmly in place. Another patriarch, disingenuous in his expression of grief, is set to take over the radio waves as well as the presidential palace.

This apparent bleakness, however, does not vitiate the ludic charge of "Mubarak Mat": the song is more carnival than commiseration, and proceeds with a decidedly optimistic attitude towards a future unwritten, and hurried forward. Allusions to Sadat's announcement and "Jifara Mat" need not be linked to cynicism and closed horizons. Fundamentally, they are anchors thrown to the familiar, attempts made to imagine the death of Mubarak and its aftermath by playing with some of the most significant cultural texts of the last half century. The fact that these anchors do not exactly catch – indeed, they contrast humorously, as we have seen – leaves the future uncertain, and open to more play, to *liʿb*. Simply – or not so simply – by treading these open waters, the players are transgressing Mubarak's myth of permanence, and daring to speculate on what comes next.

The daring look forward is also implicit in the adaptation of "Jifara Mat," not for its melancholic content, but for the work of its artists. The parody is at once a nostalgic homage to the joint aesthetic and political project of Ahmad Fuʾad Nigm and Shaykh Imam, and a reactivation of this project for the present. A *shaʿbī* ("popular class") and often vulgar performance team who were shunned by state cultural institutions and imprisoned for their

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controversial lyrics, the two gave expression to the angst of impoverished masses while also drawing on themes from national and international politics, such as the struggle and death of Che Guevara, that appealed to students and intellectuals. As Marilyn Booth has argued, Nigm and Imam "[brought] together students, workers and other activists through an aesthetic presence that remains symbolically potent even now" (2008: 19). In the context of the strikes in the cities of the Delta, "Mubarak Mat" remembers fondly the artistic mediation of alliances past, and seems to ask whether the current solidarity of online activists and artists with the workers of Al-Mahalla Al-Kubra will prove to be similarly legendary.

The parodic refrain is then interrupted with a bitter and partially untranslatable protest:

yā ʿamm aḥḥa di ishāʿāt

A7a, man! That's just a bunch of rumors!

wi ʾinn kāt bi-gadd kānit il-arḍ ithazzit

If it were for real, the earth would quake

The word *aḥḥa* is a vulgar ejaculation, approximate to "damn it!" but ultimately best left untranslated: I render it here as "a7a" to preserve its association with a particular context of use, namely social networking sites and text messages, where "7" is often substituted for the Arabic letter *ḥāʾ* (ح) as a result of the English default on most electronic devices. "A7a" is "vulgar," though because of its high frequency of use in youth slang, the sense of revulsion and moral offense it produces in more general audiences may be less pronounced. It here signals the sour disappointment that the rumors are not true, and the sense of having been duped, of having let one's guard down against false news. This ejaculation also follows in the parody of the "Jifara

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Mat." In that song, the latent emotive ejaculation with which many of the lyrics trailed off was *āh*, a mournful sigh; *āh* has now become a7a to reflect a new generation's most frequent reaction to adverse circumstances. The generation which collectively performs this song does not mourn its unfortunate circumstances with the traditional melancholy of *rithāʾ* or elegy. Instead, in the face of Mubarak's continued reign and his monotonous presence, these singers throw up a common vulgarity deployed most often against bad jokes, infelicitous performances, and everyday disturbances like traffic jams, failed ignitions, and lost flip-flops. Mubarak's permanence, once divine, has been taken down to the level of a common nuisance, so that it may be endured for just a little longer. Or rather, it is exposed as no sort of permanence at all, merely an unfortunate roadblock soon to be dismantled.

The remainder of the song is dedicated to a further exposure of this myth of permanence. One of the singers exclaims:

w-ana illi kunt fākir innū ha-yifḍal mawgūd ʿala ṭūl

And I had thought he would be here forever

ṭab mish tiʾūl inn in-nās di bitmūt!

You can't imagine such people could die!

d-ana min sāʿit m-ana mawlūd

Since the day I was born

fī ḥāgtēn sabtīn ma-yitghayyarūsh

There are two fundamental things that never change

rabbina, wa-l-qāʾid al-aʿlā li l-guyūsh!

Our Lord, and the Supreme Leader of the Armed Forces!

In a tone of mock disbelief, these lines echo the comment in Ibrahim ʿIsa's novel that most Egyptians "could simply not imagine" the world without Mubarak. The song returns to the chorus – the Nigm-Imam parody – and back again to similar comments that mock the president's permanence and robust health: "He said the Respected Sir was tough as a horse!" (ʾāl il-bāsha salīm wi zayy il-ḥiṣān). "Suzy" Mubarak – the First Lady – also makes a brief appearance, being quoted as saying that the president "did a 'super supreme' with me" (ʿamal maʿāya wāḥid kida ... ṣubir ṣubrīm!) – a tacky euphemism, borrowed from fast food menus, for sexual prowess. Such barbs follow through with the thorough trouncing of the president, demystifying his exercise of power through the hyperbolic repetition of its own terms, and rendering his body human through the exposure of his common reproductive functions.

The transgressive thrust of "Mubarak Mat" is not exhausted by its lyrics, but is played out too in the very structure of the song with its series of "noisy" interferences. In the beginning is the official broadcast. This is interrupted by radio static (*parasite*) giving way to the Nigm-Imam parody. This parody, too, is then interrupted by a discordant ejaculation of a7a, giving way to a charivari of youthful colloquialisms, sexual metaphors, caricatures, ventriloquisms, and several quips that remain inaudible. In this way, the song is broken up into three stylistic segments. The interruption between the first two segments – that is, between the official broadcast and the Nigm-Imam rendition – quite audibly mimics the performance's own relationship to authority. That is, it replays the noise – the confusion and interference – that the rumors present to the regime: they interrupt its main signal, or Mubarak's myth of permanence, sending it off course. The *ayyuhā al-muwāṭinūn* of the introduction fails to gather up its

intended receivers, the high-register language is rendered obsolete, and voices of dissent break in to sing their own message. Sadat's statement to the nation is upended by the popular duo.

How, then, might we read the second interruption, the a7a, which comes between the Nigm-Imam rendition and the open commentary of the three singers? That is, what function are we to assign this instance of noise? We might do well here to take seriously Michel Serres's aphorism about the *parasite*: he is the one who "has the last word, who produces disorder and generates a different order" (1982: 15). The "victorious" *parasite*, for Serres, has the last word, that is, he is the final interruption in a sequence of interruptions: "the one in the last position wins the game" (13). In his more optimistic moments, Serres proclaims that the result of the noise is an evolution in the order of things – indeed, a satisfactory improvement in a fundamentally unstable, noisy system. It is progress; an interpretation which takes Serres's proclamation to heart would read a similar move forward in the series of jolts that breaks up "Mubarak Mat" into three segments. Segment 1: the once authoritative, but now hollow and obsolete, form of radio broadcast, is parasited by Segment 2: the counter-cultural, but by now canonized – even quaint – Nigm-Imam phenomenon, which is parasited by Segment 3: the improvised musical sketch in the playground of the Egyptian blogosphere. Each segment gives way to a more innovative one, in a noisy evolution from master to intruder, where "the one in the last position wins the game" and generates a new game, a different play on art and politics. In this progression of three segments, we follow the major reconfigurations of technology and power in Egypt over the last 60 years, from radio's prominence in the 1950s and 1960s ("The Voice of the Arabs," etc.), to the mix of electronic and oral forms of the 1970s, to, finally, the walls, reels, texts and frames of cyberspace. Each of these forms has left its mark, and at its height claimed to define resistance (*muqāwama*), only to be overcome by the next form. The

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three-segment progression also precisely exhibits the gradual defeat of monologism, moving from the single, authoritarian voice of Segment 1, to the twin voices of the Nigm-Imam duo in Segment 2, and finally, to the three voices of Butrus, Bulus, and Maria in Segment 3. The victorious third parasite in fact inaugurates an indeterminate explosion of discourse, adopted and reworked by other players in the blogosphere. The victory of this "parasite," which has the last word(s), is the victory of "play." Our two concepts thus perform a comparable function: each is the acting out of a new scenario, a new order, through free movement or chaos. Segment 3 has interfered (produced noise) and triumphed, just as the playing of a post-Mubarak future has asserted itself over the president's myth of permanence.

Listening to "Mubarak Mat" in this way – as a sequence of 1, 2, 3 – obviously assumes a simplistic linearity of movement. But an important qualification must be made. While Segment 1 – the official broadcast – introduces the song and never repeats (it is interrupted, and stops), Segments 2 and 3 in fact alternate with each other. It is thus not accurate to claim that the Imam-Nigm parody is overcome or rendered obsolete by a victorious carnival of a7a and insults. Rather than interpreting the song's structure as a victorious progression of noise, it is more suitable to posit a playful alternation between the final two segments. The alternation is between the Imam-Nigm parody (Segment 2) – an attempt, as I have argued above, to imagine the president's passing – and the series of quips and barbs (Segment 3), which both celebrates the passing, but also doubts the veracity of the news ("A7a, man! That's just a bunch of rumors"). Neither segment truly displaces the other; instead, through this vacillation between two styles, the song manages to communicate a disorienting ambivalence, to entertain uncertainty, and leave the stage open for more play. These final two segments are only two possible reactions to an imagined future, and neither takes itself entirely seriously.

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The last word, in any case, is an elated "*mubārak māt*!" – reaffirming the collective wish, the "as if," which is the song's overriding mode and message. With the end of the song, however, its subjunctive repetition of the rumors would continue, echoing through a number of other digital forms. Several other bloggers would also "play" "Mubarak Mat" in Barthes's sense – they would interpret its text in their own medium, as one "interprets" a song by replaying it on a different instrument (1989: 62-63). These further interpretations – including those by Ahmed Naje and Muhammad Gaber, to which we now turn – would extend the ludic atmosphere performed by Butrus, Bulus, and Maria, supplying it with new acts and actors. By "playing along," these bloggers sustain the subversive stretch of imagination drawn from the chain of rumor and cast riskily at the future.

Playing Along

One of the first bloggers to catch on to the contagious chorus of *Mubārak Māt* was Ahmed Naje.[110] Entitled "The Official Song of May 4: *Mubārak Māt* … Let's Sing Along Everyone!", Naje's post on April 19th contributes with a parodic profile of each of the song's performers: the pseudonymous trio Butrus, Bulus, and Maria. May 4, we will recall, would be Mubarak's eightieth birthday – a day for which some activists had called a general strike to reignite the protests extinguished earlier in the month in the Delta. Neither the protests of early April, nor the would-be strike of May 4, 2008, were deemed to have succeeded in the short term – and yet, as I have argued above, they provided the opportunity for unprecedented expressions of dissent, and stoked aspirations for revolution both aesthetic and political. It is to these aspirations, and

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[110] Naje's relation to "play" is also performed in his occasional online moniker "Bisu." Bisu is a pseudo-diminutive form of *iblīs* ("Satan"), the original trickster. Perhaps *iblīs* is also i-bliss: "i" (for Internet) or the self, a common suffix for digital devices (i-pod, i-phone, i-pad); and "bliss" or *jouissance*, the Barthesian pleasure of the reader's play with the text.

the embattled optimism from which they emerged, that Naje p(l)ays tribute in his profile of the three musicians.

"Maria," writes Naje, is a "bright flame of zeal and patriotism," who is reported to have chanted "Down with Mubarak!" (*yasqut yasqut husnī mubārak*) in Tahrir Square – this at a time when such displays of dissent, engaged by several dozen at the most, would be encircled and muzzled by police in a matter of minutes. The emphatic consonants /ṭ/ and /ḥ/ are graphically omitted in Maria's chant, replaced with their non-emphatic counterparts /t/ and /h/; this betrays a degree of either immaturity or youthfulness, privilege or innocence, that contrasts sharply with the boldness of the act. "Bulus," according to Naje, is responsible for a number of "operations" no less legendary. His most famous was known as "Operation Mangy Cat," in which he is alleged to have hacked the audio recording archives of State Security – Egypt's notorious secret police. "Butrus," finally, is identified as an "international terrorist" equipped with a potent "voice rifle." A master of disguise, he is pursued by intelligence agencies around the world. All three subversives are associated with the terrorist "Organization of 30 February" – in reality an amorphous association of bloggers and activists whose real-world, nonviolent battles with the police and security services have been sympathetically parodied by Naje and others over the last half-decade. In the comments section below the post, fellow bloggers play along with the author's facetious criminal profiling. "A Coptic conspiracy!" declares the first commentator, to whom Naje responds: "No, sir, these ain't no Copts. They're Jewish members of Hamas planning to overthrow the regime." And so goes the *liʿb*.

The labels and images that Naje and the commentators deploy in their caricatures of Bulus, Butrus, and Maria come from a familiar source. They are drawn from the stock of accusations that the Egyptian regime has, since the 1950s, leveled at its enemies, whether foreign

armies, alleged spies, or domestic journalists – invariably characterized as conspirators, terrorists, and agitators. It is the same paranoid language that Egyptian security officials have deployed more recently to interpret the activities of bloggers, even those who, like the artists behind "Mubarak Mat," are "just playing." By so effortlessly speaking in this language, and by pointing to its frequent contradictions – the Jewish members of Hamas, for example – Naje and fellow bloggers expose its senselessness. They mock the regime's inability to understand what goes on in the *malʿab* – in fact, one of the common characteristics of "play" of this sort is that it refuses to be understood, that it denies understanding to outsiders, to those who do not play along.[111] Actually, what Naje mocks so successfully in this post is the very "plot theory" of rumors. The dominant interpretive practice of *mukāfaḥat al-shāʾiʿāt* ("combating rumors"), the plot theory, which I analyzed at length in Part 1, posits a conspiracy of identifiable agents behind every case of anonymous noise. The song "Mubarak Mat," as a semi-anonymous string of rumors, incites practitioners of this theory to search frantically for a responsible agent, diagnose his motives, and produce him before a judging audience. Anticipating and ridiculing such a response, Naje performs the complete analysis by himself in his brief post.

The purpose of these profiles – Naje's "play" or "interpretation" of the rumor-song – is not simply to mock a dominant interpretive practice and its common vocabulary, but also to laugh both *with* and *at* the so-called "Butrus, Bulus, and Maria." The "bad ass" labels ("terrorist," etc.) and superhero-like adventures (or "operations") assigned to the three are key elements in the aesthetic of character work, laced with insider humor, which is meant ultimately for consumption within the *malʿab* of this corner of the Egyptian blogosphere. Naje laughs *with* the musicians, performing a tribute to their artistic genius by playfully inserting background

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[111] For example, Hebdige's seminal book on subcultures concludes by noting the resistance of such forms to outside analysis, submitting that "the sociologists and the interested straights … threaten to kill with kindness the forms [they] seek to elucidate" (1979: 139).

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details. He laughs *at* them in the same way, as one must note the stark contrast between the fame and influence of "real" terrorists on the one hand, and the improvised song of a few amateur musicians. The latter, it would seem, are just playing. But this is not dismiss them as frivolous and irrelevant; rather, it is a stroke of self-reflexivity imbedded within the play. We can say, in other words, that Naje's laughing *at* is the self-effacing admission that *liʿb* is not real, but this does not deny the optimism inherent in the laughing *with*. A hope remains, that in this play, a real act of transgression, and transformation, is actually being performed. The possibility of influence, in the end, is not to be denied to this song, even if it would seem to make a laughable comparison to "real" terrorism.

Ahmed Naje's post closes by proclaiming "Mubarak Mat" "the official song of May 4": "Participate in the strike or don't participate, wear black or don't wear black, but sing and listen to 'Mubarak Mat.' Sing **with all your heart**!" The elation of the song, its affective charge, jingles forth; regardless of ideology and independent of any real political commitment, it calls upon more actors to join in the play.[112] By now we, too, are singing "Mubarak Mat." And so goes the *liʿb*, even as May 4 comes and goes. The form circulates through virtual paths easily traced by the hyperlinks provided in each post, but at each relay it does not remain the same. It is contaminated by the accent of each artist, interpreted, refigured, stymied, reinvigorated. It is parasited, and it parasites. It cannot remain fixed in a musical genre alone, and its transgeneric movement is demonstrated by the next rumor player, Mohamed Gaber.

On May 6, after the protests in the Delta had dissipated and two days after the president's birthday, blogger and graphic artist Mohamed Gaber created his own interpretative play on the song. Gaber – whose online aliases include Guebara (a blend of his name with that of Che Guevara) and Yasari Masri ("Leftist Egyptian") – is a major personality in the Egyptian

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[112] "Rumor is a pipe / … The still-discordant wav'ring multitude / Can play upon it." *Henry IV, Part 2*.

blogosphere, and has since become known as graphic director for the blog-to-print magazine *Wasla* and for his production of a wide range of revolutionary paraphernalia seen often in Tahrir Square.[113]   In the *malʿab*, it may be said that he runs close to both Hossam el-Hamalawy's "3arabawy" and Ahmed Naje's "Wassaʿ Khayalak." Like the former, he cultivates a decidedly Marxist-Leninist persona, but with a more ironical stance; like the latter, and like Butrus, Bulus, and Maria, he has alleged links to the Organization of 30 February. The image I discuss here plays along with the rumors of the president's death and their musical rendition, linking to the chain another ring of sarcasm, ambivalence, and noise.

Published on Guebara's Flickr account, the image "interprets" "Mubarak Mat" in a visual idiom, superimposing graffiti-like slogans on a smoke-stained or oil-soaked background. In the lower-left hand corner lurks a faded newspaper photograph of President Mubarak with mouth open and right hand raised, which holds a pen and points, as if he is lecturing pedantically or giving orders. Over this photograph are scribbled the twin phrases *mubārak māt* and *aḥḥa yaʿnī* ("like a7a"), which graphically reproduce the song's most striking lines. Rendered in black-and-white halftone, this photograph, we can tell, comes from a newspaper. The words *mubārak māt*, then, must be *kalām garāyid* or "newspaper talk": Egyptian slang for a story that no one in their right mind should believe. It is rumor; we judge it false, but wish or behave as if it were true. The "a7a" here again registers how fed-up an entire generation is with Mubarak, and the reigning affective state of *khanʾa*; the "*yaʿni*" casts a tentative "as if" over the canvas, and marks the a7a as a quotation of a previous utterance – it is something which is repeated, and will be repeated, as a gut response to a collective (lack of) stimulus. "a7a *yaʿni*": the man in the picture emits a drone that is equally dull and oppressive, a noise that must be interrupted, parasited, by a chorus

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[113] See, for example, the translation of his design *kun maʿa al-thawra* ("Be with the Revolution!") form blog to Tahrir (http://gaberism.net/blog/2011/03/08/anti-sectarianism/).

Figure 2: *Mubarak Mat* ("Mubarak has Died"), by Guebara (Mohamed Gaber)[114]

of a7as. The sensation is translated into a political register in the upper-left hand corner, in the phrase *yasquṭ yasquṭ..!* ("Down with…!"), a common slogan shouted at this time by the masses of demonstrators in Al-Mahalla Al-Kubra, and by smaller numbers in downtown Cairo (including the so-called "Maria").The impatience of millions, and their readiness for relief, finds as many ways to express itself. One of these materializes in the image's lower-right hand corner, in the phrase *kifāya / mūt ba'a..!!!* ("Enough! Die already!"). "Enough" (*kifāya*) is also the moniker of the "Egyptian Movement for Change," an alliance of artists and intellectuals formed in 2004 in opposition to the Mubarak's re-election bid and the planned succession of his son to the office. The group, while fledgling at this time and losing out in media coverage to "internet

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[114] Available at: http://www.flickr.com/photos/yasary-masry/2471467732/.

savvy" coalitions like The Youth of 6 April, nonetheless remains an important icon of resistance to the person of the president and his regime. *Mūt* ("Die!") is a direct verbal assault on Mubarak's myth of permanence, with a perlocutionary edge as sharp as Ibrahim ʿIsa's novel, *The Murder of the Big Man*. It is a command, and since *kifāya / mūt baʾa..!!!* is the only phrase in Guebara's image produced in type (the rest are splashed or sprayed as graffiti), it would seem, ironically, to match the commanding pose and newspaper photograph of Mubarak himself. Through this cunning act of ventriloquism, the artist renders the president not only suicidal, but already dead, as the subject is split from his discursive authority, subject instead to his own "subjects" and their collective wish. This is the force of rumor as we have seen in previous chapters: it is potently ventriloquistic, a parasite forcing its victims to say things against their individual will. Finally, in the upper-right hand corner is splashed a red hammer-and-sickle, Guebara's insignia. This is not the fixed icon of a rigid Marxist ideology; rather, it should be interpreted in terms of what Barthes called the "third meaning": an aura of contextually activated associations, locally construed, and homologous to the other signs and inscriptions installed in the image. Hammer-and-sickle does not mean "Marxist," but "anti-Mubarakness," "resistance," "international solidarity," "modernity," and even "play." On top of the hammer-and-sickle is scribbled the phrase *mubārak ḥayy lā yamūt* ("Mubarak lives, He does not die"), a parody of the phrase *allāh ḥayy lā yamūt* ("God lives, He does not die"), originally spoken by Abu Bakr, the father-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, upon the latter's death. Mocking the deification of the president and his myth of permanence, the phrase also rests awkwardly over the artist's insignia. It is possible that the unwitting imposition of such words upon the very sign they contradict points to the unruliness of rumor as a tool of resistance. The artist-rumormonger, and not only

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the president, has been made to say things he does not intend. "Mubarak lives" over and above those who resist.

With these mixed signals – graffiti announcing Mubarak's death, and other inscriptions declaring his immortality – Guebara's image translates graphically the same uncertainty and ambivalence played by the original song. And yet, also like the song, its transgressive force lies precisely in its pushing at the boundaries of the real beyond the presence of Mubarak, in addition to its insistence on a solid, if muddied, optimism. With Guebara, the rumor-play gains a visual dimension that, despite its "virtuality," prepares for and presages a post-Mubarak real. Indeed many of the artist's other designs were already being spray-painted on "real" walls in Cairo and Alexan dria, before going viral on t-shirts and urban spaces during the 18 days that sealed Mubarak's fall. The viewer laughs at the image's multiple jabs at a dominant myth, and perhaps flips by after a few seconds – but even in the brevity of a passing click, there flashes a certain glimpse of a reality in play.

Conclusion

Gaber's image, and the song it visualized, would have their hopes delayed when Mubarak survived the protests of April and May 2008 to enjoy nearly two more years of perfect health. However, in early March, 2010, rumors of the president's death erupted again after he had suddenly taken ill during a visit to Germany. Speculation swirled in and out of Heidelberg University Hospital concerning the octogenarian's health, and it was eventually revealed that he had undergone an operation for the removal of the gall bladder and a duodenal polyp: in this context, "Mubarak Mat" would gain new life in cyberspace. On March 12, Mohamed Gaber founded a Facebook page with the title "Mubarak Mat" to channel rumors and every manner of

gossip and innuendo about the president's health. The page's profile image is a stylized black-and-white image of a silent Mubarak, with the black ribbon of martyrdom in the upper-left hand corner; its official description is simply *sa-yakhlufu mubārak mubārak* ("Mubarak will succeed Mubarak"), and the "contact information" provides a link to the 2008 song. Other Facebook groups with similar titles and varying degrees of participation would also funnel these explorations in the subjunctive, playing along with the possible.

In this section, I have argued for a particular affirmative function of rumors, namely, their use as experimental fictions on their way to becoming fact. I have found insights from the study of "play" or *liʿb* useful in capturing the particular epistemic modality with which certain bloggers engaged rumors of President Mubarak's death beginning in 2008. First, play has allowed me to situate these performances in relation to a space – the *malʿab* of the Egyptian blogosphere – where its attitude and stylistic register can be maintained and shared by loosely affiliated players. The emphasis on space, however, is not to impose artificial limits, but to reach at a more viable or local sense of location that broader labels like "cyberspace" or "the Arab Internet" can deliver. Second, I have stressed the notion that while play is not "real" in any strict sense – I have called it, following Turner, "subjunctive" – those so engaged recognize their departure from reality by adopting a self-critical attitude. Thus it should be distinguished from the more self-serious fictions of Mubarak's permanence and legitimacy, as well as what Hossam el-Hamalawy has called "cyber-fantasies" – a distinction the latter also acknowledges in the song "Mubarak Mat," which he posted and celebrated (indeed, played with) on his own blog. The strain of rumors that I have analyzed here are not simple fictions; rather, they are playful, enabling fictions with a critical and transformative edge. While I have often alluded to this transformative potential of the "Mubarak Mat" players, I find it necessary to elaborate on it further by way of conclusion.

Against the dominant myth of Mubarak's permanence, these performances of rumormongering cut into the fabric of apparent reality to assert alternatives. This play entails, on the one hand, a thorough exposure of the myth's absurdity, whether by noisily interrupting its delivery, mocking the president's sexual fitness, or parodying familiar slogans. It also involves fishing around for possible scenarios, whether these are drawn from the resonant texts of radio and television, or cobbled together in more subtle combinations of insider humor. In this way, mental maps are prepared for the future, and the "as if" is brought closer to the "may be" or even "is." But beyond this, I am arguing that "Mubarak Mat" manages to enact the scenario it proposes by engendering an absorbing, repeatedly renewed set of aesthetic practices and affective states. To the extent that "Mubarak's permanence" imposes a pervasive sense of *khanʾa* and *waqf*, the collective play of Butrus, Bulus, Maria, and others effectively assassinates the president and what he stands for. Through the movement of these rumor-plays, a release into carnival is performed and lived out, rendering the signs of the president's presence greatly reduced, if not totally expunged from the realm of consequences. If the man himself remains alive, these innovative spasms of art nonetheless enable a tangible sense of his death. This sense is sustained and deepened – unlike Ibrahim ʿIsa's single, if repeated, writerly transgression – through multiple genres and expressive media. The writing of a post-Mubarak Egypt is on the wall, accompanied by its theme song and graphic propaganda.

Some qualifications, however, must be made. Counter-cultural forms, as I have discussed above, are haunted by the potential of complicity with the signs of domination they apparently contest. It is easy to see how "Mubarak" could fall prey to such accusations: its very repetition of the president's myths and iconography re-inscribes him at the center of power, even if the intention is for him to be de-centered and disempowered. Butrus, Bulus, and Maria are,

after all, those who would, according to Christian tradition, witness the resurrection of a divine figure, as much as his death. The artists could have ignored Mubarak altogether, and thus maintained the *malʿab* as a "space distant from politics" as Ahmed Naje had once called it. While it should be clear from my discussion above that I do not share such concerns of complicity – my analysis has favored overwhelmingly the transgressive nature of "Mubarak" – it is necessary to keep them in mind; I shall return to discuss them in the conclusion to the following chapter, where I expand on the problems inherent in scholarly euphoria about blogging and related "new media."

Chapter 8: "The Truth about …": Parody against Paranoia in Revolutionary Egypt (2011-2012)

In the previous chapter, humor or play was shown to lubricate and expand the pathways of rumor. In this chapter, I investigate the ways in which humor of a comparable sort is deployed *against* it. I move now to revolutionary Egypt, as the *parasite* analyzed in the previous chapter proved to be "victorious," and the scenario it proposed virtually came into play on the ground. It was, in turn, to find itself chased by *parasite* from the opposite direction. Revolutions thrust consumers and producers of mass media into a kind of epistemic fog conducive to the breeding of rumors. This was the case with the July Revolution in 1952, and the Revolution of 25 January has been no different. The appearance in public life of dark horse personalities like Wael Ghonim, the generals of SCAF, and ʿAbd al-Munʿim Abu al-Futuh; the signs and slogans of new social and political groupings; the roaming of criminal elements like *al-balṭagiyya* ("thugs" hired by counter-revolutionary forces) and *al-mulaththamīn* ("masked men" held responsible for acts of gas-pipeline sabotage); and of course the still uncertain health of the former president: all of these have become ready topics of rumor, speculation, and conspiracy theory. As always, many of these stories are of unknown origin; however, a number of tales about foreign plots or the treachery of the revolutionaries could be traced to media representatives of the counter-revolution, and members of SCAF. Not long after these rumors appeared, artists in cyberspace sympathetic to the revolution retaliated with colorful "flirtations" of a different kind. Here I analyze the YouTube videos of cartoonist and animator Ashraf Hamdi which parody the rumors and conspiracy theories about Google manager Wael Ghonim and other youth activists. Engaging previous scholarship on the aesthetics and politics of parody (Dentith 2000; Genette 1997; Hutcheon 1987, 1994, 2000; Rose 1993), I focus on these videos' evaluative stance to

understand how they simultaneously critique and play with the rumors to which they refer. I will also examine the interpretive difficulties involved in Hamdi's use of parody, and how, in Hutcheon's words, it has been prone to many "misfirings."

The significance of this chapter cannot be missed when compared to Part 1 of my dissertation. Parodies like those designed by Ashraf Hamdi – there have been others – provide an alternative strategy to the violent rhetorical and disciplinary practices pursued by the regime under the pretext of "combating rumors." While false accusations, campaigns of distortion, and parasitic "noise" are as potentially destructive for the democratic agenda of the young revolutionaries as they are for the authoritarian regime they oppose, the former respond with an altogether different rhetoric. This new rhetoric, I argue, is able to remain inclusive while retaining its critical edge. Although it exposes the artificiality, even "stupidity" of the rumors and implicitly chastises their agents and transmitters, there is an important qualification. Through playful imitation, the artists are able to salvage a form of pleasure from the parodied rumors. In this way, we might say that parody offers a way of symbolically "incorporating the parasite," not only living with the noise but including it in one's own work, playing with it, and evolving into a new configuration of the aesthetic and the political: revolutionary art that accepts its "other" as a partner in play. Such transformations as occur, of course, depend upon a felicitous reception of the image's rhetoric, lest it, too, dissolve into just so much noise.

Intertexts: Rumors between Revolution and Counterrevolution

On July 24, 2011, General Hasan al-Ruwayni made a confession. A member of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces or SCAF (Egypt's *de facto* governing body since the ousting of President Husni Mubarak in February), al-Ruwayni had telephoned into a talk show on the

commercial television station "Dream 2" to discuss the events of the previous day, when a peaceful march on army headquarters in Cairo had been repelled by violence. Dismissing the demonstrators as misled, even treasonous, the general maintained that behind all this commotion was what he called "a most dangerous tool": *al-ishāʿa*, the rumor. Someone overhead someone talking about atrocities committed by the army in the northern port city of Ismailiyya. He told a friend, and that friend told two, who told four, who told thirty-nine, and so on. Such is the nature of the revolutionary crowd, willing to believe anything, that it can be whipped into frenzy at any moment. Then al-Ruwayni said something unexpected:

> I know the effect that rumor has in a crowd ... I myself spread rumors in Tahrir Square, when I wanted to calm them down. I spread a rumor that Ahmad ʿIzz had been arrested ... and that the Justice Minister had been arrested ... that their demands had been met. And the square would go quiet! I know the effect that rumor has in revolutionary crowds. I know how to quiet the square, and I know how to arouse the square.[115]

Rumors are bad, but I am also "bad," he seemed to be saying. The television host smiled (she laughed, and was fired several days later). The Egyptian Twittersphere lit up, and the general's minute-and-a-half boast made its way around YouTube. "Al-Ruwayni admits to spreading rumors and manipulating the revolutionaries"; "Al-Ruwayni: I am the source of the rumors"; and similar captions jeered at the general's bald hypocrisy.[116]

Al-Ruwayni's sexually charged boast struck a particularly resonant chord in a political context of increasing complexity and confusion. Since the beginning of the revolution on January 25, 2011, revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries alike have struggled to navigate their way through a public sphere spinning with all manner of rumors. The predicament is captured in similar statements repeated by pundits in private and state-owned media. "Egypt has

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[115] Available at: http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=JUYDlKx9k1k&feature=related.
[116] For more on General Ruwayni and his relation to rumors, see the Facebook page *il-ruwēni mish bitāʿ sandiwitshāt, il-ruwēni bitāʿ ishāʿāt* ("Ruwayni makes rumors, not sandwiches").

become a prime market for rumors since the revolution," declared the host of a program dedicated to the issue on the state-owned Nile TV in June, 2011. "Have we become a people addicted to rumors?" she went on to ask; her guest, a professor of political sociology, declared that the rule of law had been replaced by the "rule of rumors" (*sharʿiyyat al-shāʾiʿāt*).[117] To understand how this perception has been reinforced since January, 2011, it is necessary to review some of the loudest rumors of the period, investigate the context of their emergence, and take account of the "noise" they have produced. This will allow us to understand, in turn, the threat that rumors have presented to the major ideals and personalities of the revolution, and prepare us to analyze the particular modes of response deployed by revolutionary artists.

The noisiest of the revolution's *ishāʿāt* may be divided into two basic types. Those of the first type would seem to lack an identifiable author or agenda, emerging rather at the confluence of local stories, attitudes, and structures of feeling: a context of credibility in which a rumor "makes sense."[118] A particular strain of rumors linked to "sectarian" violence, with various iterations, may be taken as representative. In early March, 2011, residents of the village of Sul burned down a church after hearing that its members were practicing magic to lure away Muslim women. In May, another church was stormed and ransacked, and at least a dozen people killed, in the working-class neighborhood of Imbaba in Cairo, after rumors circulated both locally and online that a Muslim girl was being held captive inside. The scenario repeated itself in the Delta village of Mit Bashar in February, 2012. A dominant narrative in the national media quickly snapped into place, fitting these events into the familiar patterns of sectarianism (*ṭāʾifiyya*) and general lawlessness feared to have increased since the revolution. More nuanced readings, however, situated the rumors within a local context of belief in magic, shared sites and icons of

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[117] "Mustaqbal Misr: al-Shaʾiʿat wa Tashkil al-Raʾy al-ʿAmm baʿd al-Thawra" ("The Future of Egypt: Rumors and the Formation of Public Opinion after the Revolution"), Nile TV, June 5, 2011.
[118] See my discussion on the poetics of rumor (*poésie fabuleuse*) in Chapter 4.

devotion, televised social and religious dramas, structures of economic and educational exclusion, sexual frustration, and traditional mechanisms for the externalization of blame. [119] The "rumor of the kidnapped girl" may also be read as the expression of the desire to uncover the real behind iconic sites of secrecy and the sublime – especially as such events occurred in proximity to the storming of State Security archives by demonstrators.[120] Both events derive from "the suspicion that someone his hiding the REAL behind the curtain" (Stewart 1999: 13) – a key element in the "paranoid style" which I will return to in the next section.

Whatever interpretations developed around these incidents, they helped to reposition rumor as a significant social problem, quite likely to result in violence and anarchy. In addition, they dramatically revealed a shattered epistemic terrain, where traditional folk beliefs lived in uncomfortable proximity to the narratives of progress shaped in Tahrir. As one resident of Sul, interviewed by a blogger investigating the rumors that irrupted there, put it, "Those Revolution types from Cairo don't know nothin'!"[121] For the interviewer, fresh from Tahrir, the rumors and the belief in magic were unbelievable; for the interviewee, the rumors made perfect sense. Two different worlds were brought into view, each with its own structure of knowledge and believability that made the other seemingly incomprehensible. In such circumstances, for any metanarrative to take shape – whether for enlightenment and progress, or for their antitheses – would appear quite problematic. This kind of rumor thus threatened the revolution, or at least those strands which followed a universalizing ideological trajectory, from the very beginning.

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[119] Cf. Ahmad Abdalla, "Itfih wa al-Khalal al-Miʿmari" ("Itfih and the Architectural Flaw"), at blog.ahmadabdalla.net/?p=439, and Zenobia, "Imbaba on Fire 'Updated'," at egyptianchronicles.blogspot.com/2011/05/imbaba-on-fire.html.

[120] A commentator on Ahmad Abdalla's post (see previous note) makes this connection between the storming of State Security and the storming of churches. For the commentator ("MOU": http://blog.ahmadabdalla.net/?p=439#comment-5553), both acts are justified according to the same logic.

[121] Ibid, Abdalla, (*dūl shabāb min il-qāhira min bitūʿ is-sawra mish daryānīn bi-ḥāja*).

If this first type of rumor emerges seemingly spontaneously and without a recognizable author, the second type is what we might call "weaponized." This would include rumors with identifiable authors – such as those deployed by General al-Ruwayni – as well as those whose authors are hidden, but which are generally perceived to serve, or to have been exploited by, recognizable political interests. Another example would be the Mubarak death rumors, which picked up with an almost surreal frequency after the president's ouster, but for altogether different reasons than before. At least twice in July of 2011, reports of his imminent passing circulated in Egypt's major newspapers.[122] An article in the pro-revolutionary *al-Dustur al-Asli* described the situation as "a television soap opera," whose main character, as it were, kept dying and coming back to life.[123] December heard more of the same, as did most months of 2012.[124] The cosmic irony spinning through all these instances, of course, was that the stories were likely intended to work in the dead man's favor by whipping up sympathy before his trial, or testing the waters for a possible amnesty. The sources, as always, were often difficult to pin down, and at least in the two cases cited above from July, 2011, the most visible transmitters were journalists with a history of opposition to Mubarak: Ibrahim ʿIsa of *al-Dustur al-Asli*, and Waʾil al-Ibrashi, both of whom had been tried for spreading the same rumors for altogether different purposes in September, 2007. Yet fingers pointed at those closest to the former president, including members of SCAF, interested in protecting their former patron by all possible means of deception. In other words, the very rumors which the regime had once feared as acts of regicide were now being deployed by its remnants in a desperate attempt at prolonging its authority.

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[122] *al-Dustur al-Asli*, 7/11/2011, 7/15/2011.
[123] Ibid., 7/15/2011.
[124] See *Akhbar Baladna*, 12/8/2011 (http://www.baladnanews.com/more.php?newsid=29195&catid=23), and "Once Illegal, Health Rumors Now Have Mubarak Die Daily," *The New York Times*, 6/12/2012.

Such was the dominant suspicion, in any case, even if a sly anonymity kept the rumormongers safe from exposure and direct rebuttal.

In truth, there has been no shortage of this "weaponized" type of rumors since the beginning of the revolution. These have included, among others: rumors about presidential candidate ʿAbd al-Munʿim Abu al-Futuh's links to terrorism; rumors about presidential candidate Hazim Abu Ismaʿil's mother being an American citizen (these turned out to be true); a rumor that Egypt's Islamist-dominated parliament was debating a so-called "necrophilia law"; rumors of a "plan to divide Egypt"; rumors about the "foreign agendas" being pursued by revolutionary groups and personalities like The Youth of 6 April, so-called "anarchists," and Wael Ghonim. It is these latter rumors which interest us here, as they have become the object of anti-rumor parodies in cyberspace. It is worth elaborating on the media landscape across which they spread, before narrowing in on one particular rumor for closer analysis. I will then outline a framework for the reading of parody, as it has been deployed against this and similar rumors.

The moment crowds headed towards Tahrir Square on January 25, 2011, the media organs of the state and pro-regime groups set in motion a machinery of noise aimed at discrediting the nascent revolution. Both as author of propaganda and exploiter of negative rumors already in circulation, the broadcast voices of the "counter-revolution" (*al-thawra al-muḍādda*) took advantage of several principle sites of dissemination. Their center was often the state-run Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU), with its several national and satellite channels, and which is usually referred to simply as "Maspero" after the building which houses its headquarters. During the 18 days of demonstrations in Tahrir, Maspero grew beyond its regular pro-regime perspective into a veritable theater of the absurd, alternately casting the demonstrators as foreign agents, or ignoring their slogans and presenting them as pro-Mubarak.

Confessions and testimonies of alleged revolutionaries were aired to support accusations that they had accepted foreign funds, espoused extremist ideologies, and resorted to violence, while (erstwhile) pop-musicians and soap-opera stars were recruited to lament the many inconveniences caused by the demonstrators, such as traffic congestion, the disruption of the "wheel of production," and the stalling of consumerism's daily rituals of fast-food and cheap entertainment. But Maspero's machinery of noise was not dismantled after the fall of Mubarak, as its hastily reshuffled management quickly declared allegiance to the generals of SCAF. This was no more apparent than it was on the night of October 9, 2011, when a demonstration outside of Maspero headquarters led largely by Coptic Christians was attacked by military and security forces. Even as tanks ran down peaceful demonstrators and police fired live ammunition into the crowd, Egyptian television continued to report that casualties had been suffered by the army, rather than the 28 deaths and more than 200 injuries eventually counted among the demonstrators. More than this, Maspero news anchors incited viewers against the demonstrators using fiercely sectarian language, as they called for the defense of "our army" against "the Copts." The massacre reaffirmed the complicity of state media in the counter-revolution waged by SCAF.

Two other features of the media landscape, active in the counter-revolutionary rumor-mill, deserve note. The first, privately-owned television stations with regime sympathies, finds an extreme expression in Qanat al-Faraʿin ("The Pharaohs' Channel"). Its garrulous owner and presenter Tawfiq ʿUkasha, whether in his long-winded monologues or conversations with the effete prince of kitsch Ahmad Sibaydar ("Ahmad Spider"), has become infamous for emitting dizzying plumes of conspiracy theory around the revolutionaries. When mouthed by Sibaydar, these conspiracy theories have concentrated obsessively on the freemasonry of Google executive

and activist Wael Ghonim.[125] The second major peddler of such rumors has been the media organs of the Muslim Brotherhood. While members of the group participated, albeit belatedly, in the 18 days of protests in January-February, 2011, its leadership has since adopted a rhetoric of demonization aimed at those who insist the revolution continue. It has, in addition, been responsible for espousing the same brand of fantastical fear-mongering as Qanat al-Faraʿin, most notoriously when the group's newspaper warned of an "anarchist plot" being brewed by youth in "Vendetta" masks.[126]

From these many outlets, rumors against the major representatives of the revolution, ranging from the mundane to the fantastic, have taken shape, been launched deliberately, or given wider circulation. One particular rumor – a series of online images which detail Wael Ghonim's connections to freemasonry, Zionism, and Western imperialism – will be the focus of my analysis here. While the originator of these rumor-images is unknown, they visualize the accusations launched by many of the media outlets we have identified, and have circulated on a number of internet forums, Facebook pages, and blogs.

Waʾil Ghunem Masuni ("Wael Ghonim is a Freemason")

Wail Ghonim (b. 1980) attained prominence as a leader in what he, among many others, deemed a leaderless revolution. In 2010, while a marketing manager at Google, Ghonim founded the popular Facebook group, "We Are All Khaled Said," dedicated to the memory of the Alexandrian youth murdered by police earlier that year. Through this group, and through

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[125] Ahmad Sibaydar famously claimed in an interview with Tawfiq ʿUkasha that "Wael Ghonim's given me a hole in my brain," and that "Wael Ghonim is my whole life." See: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrTkNXQRWT8.
[126] The Brotherhood's newspaper, *al-Huriyya wa al-ʿAdala* (*Freedom and Justice*), featured a headline on January 21, 2012 that accused revolutionaries of being in league with "anarchists," whose secret sign was the "V-for-Vendetta mask," famous from the eponymous film. The headline attracted mockery because of its erroneous rendering of "Vendetta" as "*bāndītā*" (a meaningless word, evocative of "panda") in Arabic script.

Figure 3: Wael Ghonim image collage with "masonic temple" and Giordano logo

contacts with activist groups like The Youth of 6 April, he helped organize for the demonstrations on January 25, 2011, and was detained by the regime for an eleven-day period during the uprising. After his release, Ghonim's emotional interview on the commercial channel Dream TV, in addition to subsequent media appearances, cast him as a major representative of the revolution, even while he rejected any particular political affiliation or agenda beyond his general organizational and technological work. Given his sudden rise to fame – even to many bloggers and youth activist groups he had been a relative unknown – Ghonim's origins, intentions, and affiliations quickly became the subject of both deliberate campaigns of defamation and spontaneous eruptions of rumor.

Sometime in early February, 2011, several image collages began circulating on Internet forums and Facebook walls allegedly revealing the "truth" about Wael Ghonim.[127] Each collage juxtaposes photographs of the Google manager with photographs of several presumed representatives and icons of *al-māsūniyya* ("freemasonry"). Circles are drawn around certain of Ghonim's gestures, articles of clothing, or accessories, each of which is connected by arrow to identical forms as they appear in their original "Masonic" context. Three basic collages may be identified, often but not always appearing together on the same website. The first places several photographs and screen captures of Ghonim, in which his left arm is raised and a green gel bracelet adorns his wrist, next to images of White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, who wears a purple gel bracelet. The gel bracelets on both Ghonim and Gibbs are circled, with some connected by arrows. The collages are often without text, save for the comments of various users, but the gel bracelet collage comes variously with superimposed captions, such as "You think it's just a coincidence??" (*tiftikru mugarrad ṣudfa*??) and "I'd love to get one explanation for what we see here / No comment" (*nifsi fi tafsīr wāḥid li-lli iḥna shayfīnu / wa lā taʿlīq*). The second collage juxtaposes pictures of Ghonim wearing a t-shirt with a lion logo, and a picture of him with his children wearing the same t-shirts, with a photographic of a Masonic temple. The lion logo on the t-shirt nearly matches a metal coat of arms with two lions on the temple's façade; both are circled and connected with arrows. In the third collage, Ghonim appears holding up both hands with fingers outstretched − a gesture seemingly imitating typing at a keyboard. The juxtaposed images show Presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton making the "sign of the horns" hand gesture; Pope Benedict XVI making a similar gesture; and a demonic cult drawing with the sign of the horns.

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[127] For example, http://www.almstba.com/vb/t11409.html. The analysis below concerns the images on this site.

The rhetoric of these rumor-images clearly follows in the tradition of conspiracy theory and the "paranoid style" of politics, which I have discussed in greater detail in Part 1. Such a tradition responds to a number of historical and psychological factors: the real history of imperialism and foreign plots in the Middle East; a feeling of dispossession or political disenfranchisement, and a lingering anxiety over the "real" sources of agency over the individual and society; a desire to resolve this anxiety through fixing a strong image of the enemy. In addition, these collages allow us to analyze two other aspects of the paranoid style: its epistemological structure (its interpretive relation to the "facts"), and its resonance with socially significant objects and themes.

According to Kathleen Stewart (1999), conspiracy theory develops as a "skeptical, paranoid, obsessive practice of scanning for signs and sifting through bits of evidence for the missing link" (14). The conspiracy theorist, as consumer of mass media or surfer of the internet, is convinced that the "real" can be located in the proliferation of images that he encounters, that it can be cracked like a code or pieced together like a puzzle. The smallest details – Ghonim's clothing, his gestures, etc. – become significant. Conspiracy theory does not eschew evidence; it is obsessed with it, as Hofstadter (1996) noted in his seminal article. It carefully outlines its claims, whether with copious footnotes, or, in the case at hand, with photographs linked by circles and arrows. The difference between logically presented scholarship and the "paranoid style," as Hofstadter observes, is that the later executes a "big leap from the undeniable to the unbelievable" (38) – that is, it proceeds from observable facts like wristbands and lions to fantastical claims like freemasonry. This is similar to what Barthes (1988), in his study of classical rhetoric, has identified as the *enthymeme*: an arrangement of proofs that, unlike the syllogism, remains "incomplete," leaving out one or several of the "steps" made towards the

apparently logical conclusion. Its persuasion relies not on "scientific" reasoning, but on what the "public" finds "plausible" (57-58). Barthes also locates a "pleasure" in the *enthymeme* just as Stewart locates a "pleasure" in the practice of conspiracy theory. Following the *enthymeme*, "one has the agreeable feeling (even under duress) of discovering something new by a kind of natural contagion, of capillarity which extends the known (the opinable) toward the unknown" (Barthes: 60); practicing conspiracy, one finds pleasure in "the speculating, the hypervigilant scanning, the scheming, the meticulous planning, the lists, the inventories of equipment, the clever bricolage of making do, the invention of new tools out of ordinary household products…" (Stewart: 14). The Ghonim images stimulate the viewer by such meticulous, but also very accessible and "do-it-yourself" tactics as collage and drawing arrows. Indeed, we should add, the viewer is empowered with the very agency that he is denied by a still entrenched authoritarianism. Anyone can wield these most simple, democratic tools to expose the powers that be. Thus while conspiracy theory posits a nearly omnipotent enemy, it stops short of total pessimism (Hofstadter: 30), retaining the possibility of salvation through hypervigilance and critique.

The conspiracy theorist gropes around for evidence, and finds pleasure in connecting the dots. But this is not a totally random process; rather, the evidence is drawn from objects and themes glittering with social, psychological, and historical significance. Prime among these is the alleged *māsūniyya* ("freemasonry") of Wael Ghonim, used to characterize his treasonous, conspiratorial designs. Given the activist's sudden emergence from obscurity onto the public stage, the theory of freemasonry places him in a familiar narrative of secret plots, providing a background story, filling in the missing details, and inserting a legible agenda "behind" his actions. Moreover, freemasonry gives structure and leadership to a revolution that famously has

lacked both – how else can one make sense of such heterogeneous crowds? There is also a glint of reality in these claims, since Ghonim's actions, and those of most revolutionaries, can accurately be described as "secret plotting," given the often anonymous nature of online organizing. But what privileges "freemasonry" as a credible suspicion is its historical resonance both globally and locally. It is no coincidence that Hofstadter, in his seminal article on the "paranoid style" in American politics, cites as his first example the conspiracy theories surrounding Masonic lodges in the United States that have circulated since the eighteenth century. Locally, in Egypt, freemasonry has a real history stretching back to the French invasion of 1798 (Wissa 1989).[128] However, after the 1952 military coup, the freemasons were among the many groups and associations tainted by an aura of cosmopolitanism that quickly became the target of attacks by the new regime, and were eventually abolished by President Nasser in 1961 (Wissa: 143). Memories of the regime's violent campaigns against the alleged plots of freemasons have secured the group's place as a recurrent theme in contemporary conspiracy theories.

Each of the three objects circled in the images – the gel bracelet, the lion insignia, and the sign of the horns gesture – are proposed as "sure signs" of freemasonry, though their privileging as such is by no means random. In many cultures, their shifting signification has become the object of contestation, speculation, and fantasy. Like Wael Ghonim himself, these objects are floating signifiers that possess a peculiar, seductive shine, due perhaps to their novelty, sudden proliferation, uncertain origin, exclusivity, or seeming reticence to pronounce on themselves. They are even "uncanny" in one of the senses Freud allows the term: one encounters them

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[128] Both British- and French-affiliated Masonic lodges began to mushroom in the middle of the nineteenth century, attracting large swaths of the country's social and political elite. Rather than vehicles of foreign penetration, the lodges were most often considered social and political clubs for nationalist leaders like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Saʿd Zaghlul (Wissa 1989).

repeatedly in odd places – "You think it's just a coincidence??" (*tiftikru mugarrad ṣudfa??);* thus they call out for explanation.[129] Various styles of the gel bracelet, for example, have given rise to moral panics in the United States, in particular since their sudden rise in popularity over the last decade. Fearfully labeled "sex bracelets," they have been interpreted as indexes of youth sex practices, with different colors signifying a different degree of promiscuity.[130] The gel bracelets worn by Wael Ghonim and Robert Gibbs, however, belong to the style made popular by Lance Armstrong in 2004, which may advocate any number of social causes. The "sign of the horns" gesture, too, has been subjected to various and often heated resignifications in many locations (Morris 1979: 120-124). In the Ghonim collages, it is executed by Presidents Bush and Clinton as the "Hook 'em Horns" signal of the University of Texas; elsewhere, it signals sexual infidelity or "cuckolding." Finally, the lion insignia worn by Ghonim – in fact, the logo of the Hong Kong-based clothing store Giordano – lends itself easily to a hermeneutics of suspicion on account of its ambiguity. It belongs to a class of commercial and corporate logos that have generated rumors, most famously those which read Satanism into Proctor and Gamble's moon-and-stars logo in the 1980s (cf. Coombe 1997; Kapferer 1990).

Through the enthymemic pleasures of presentation and connection, and through dialogue with themes and objects that excite popular speculation, these image collages grab Wael Ghonim in the act of conspiracy, pinning to him a direct and deliberate agency over current events. By such means, a resolution is sought to the complexity of the revolution, and a particular character is targeted with assassination. And yet, despite their dangerous rhetoric, the images would provide the tools for their own dismantling. Engaged by numerous artists through modes of

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[129] Freud speaks of "otherwise … innocent" things that, when encountered repeatedly, become surrounded with an "uncanny atmosphere" and force "upon us the idea of something fateful and inescapable where otherwise we should have spoken of 'chance' only." He goes on to say that most people in this situation "will be tempted to ascribe a secret meaning to this obstinate recurrence" of the thing (2003: 144).

[130] http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/13/us/13bracelets.html?_r=2&partner=rss&emc=rss

parody, the rumors about Wael Ghonim would find themselves combatted in their own terms, and deflected back to their source.

Parodies of Rumor

"Parody," like other key words in contemporary literary and cultural theory, enjoys a classical Greek provenance, and a long history of scholarly interest. Historical reviews of the term have traced its evolution as a rhetorical trope in art, literature, and other cultural forms, comparing and contrasting it to other intertextual modes armed with a humorous or critical edge (Dentith 2000; Genette 1997; Hutcheon 2000; Rose 1993). Parody is often distinguished from similar modes like satire and pastiche on the basis of its formal properties, such as the manner in which it registers difference from the work it critiques (tone, accent, timing), the degree of such difference (subtle change versus radical transformation), or the nature of the target it selects for critique (a person, another text, or an entire tradition). While some scholars make only very few such formal distinctions – Hutcheon, for example, separates *parody* from *satire* on the basis that the former is used to comment on another aesthetic work (its target is "intramural"), while the latter is used to comment on a political or moral issue (its target is "extramural"; 2000: 54) – others, like Genette, engage in a taxonomical frenzy, seeking to separate parody from satire, caricature, pastiche, etc., in the most absolute formal terms possible. Such distinctions, however, are unlikely to hold in all cases, and are often a matter of convention. It is sufficient for our purposes to settle on a broad definition: in parody, one performance playfully imitates another, while applying a critical edge.

There is a more important reason for maintaining this broad definition. As Dentith argues, excessive concern with the formal distinctions between parody and similar modes

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distract us from the more important issue that parody raises: its evaluative and political work (2000: 14). Indeed this is primarily what interests me in my analysis of parodies of the Ghonim rumor-images. The issue of parody's evaluative stance and its politics has been the subject of some scholarly dispute. While standard definitions of parody have insisted on its mocking or negative attitude towards a particular target, more recent theories have attempted to be more inclusive, posing a plurality of ethical stances for the practice, not all of which are negative. Hutcheon (1987) observes that there are "many possible pragmatic positions and strategies open to parody today … from reverence and mockery" (204); Dentith (2000: 6) and Rose (1993: 47) have made similar observations. For example, as I have shown in Chapter 7, the parody of Nigm and Imam's song "Jifara Mat," embedded in the performance of "Mubarak Mat," unfolds in a mode of referential homage rather than derision. At the same, it cuts derisively at the figure of the president. Thus while *imitation* is crucial in conceptualizing parody, its relation to its target(s) can remain ambiguous. It is not always apparent when confronting a work of parody whether it is intended to tentatively appraise, quietly applaud, elbow in the side, or hack to pieces the work it imitates. It remains the task of the analyst to both determine a probable evaluative stance, and register the ambivalence and even indecision which surely must be allowed to all artists.

As a consequence of its evaluative stance, parody has often been imbued with a political trajectory that is equally the subject of dispute. If parody is directed scornfully at a dominant text, practice, figure, or tradition, it may be treated as a democratic, "subversive" force – for example, Ahmed Naje's parody of the "plot theory" of rumor in Chapter 7. It may conversely be considered "conservative" if its scorn serves to lay siege to innovative forms and uphold what it considers the norm. It may also be suspected of conservatism if its evaluative stance is no more

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than fawning nostalgia, or a reactionary glorification of the past (Dentith: 19-20). Many of

Gamal al-Ghitani's novels might be (mis)interpreted in this way. The politics of parody,

ultimately, cannot be determined in the abstract. It remains, together with evaluative stance, the

guiding question through our study of rumor parodies, beginning with the work of Ashraf

Hamdi.

   Dr. Ashraf Hamdi (b. 1982) graduated from Cairo University's School of Dentistry in

2005, and since 2001 has worked professionally as a cartoonist in a variety of formats, including

simple editorial cartoons (*kārīkātīr*), young adult literature, graphic short stories, and digital

video. Since 2011, he has served as the Egyptian manager for *Kharabish*, a workshop for young

cartoonists around the Arab World that has produced a series of popular YouTube videos

parodying the major figures and events of the Arab Spring.   While "parody" lacks an exact

equivalent in Arabic, many of Hamdi's works would be characterized colloquially as *sākhir(a)*

(an adjective alternately translated as "sarcastic," "mocking," "satirical," or "parodic"), which is

also the word the artist himself has used to describe his parodies of the Ghonim rumors.[131] To

label a drawing, novel, or other aesthetic form *sākhir* does not imply any particular formal

relation between the work and its object: it could refer to parodic imitation of another text, or a

formally distinct commentary. In the case of the Ghonim rumor videos, however, Hamdi clearly

has parodic imitation in mind.   In his own words, his mode of engaging the original

rumormongers was to "go along in the same path that they took, [and to] exaggerate what was

going on" (*amshi maʿāhum fi nafs il-sikka illi humma kānu mashyīn fīha wa inn ana abāligh fi*

illi kān ḥāṣil). This describes the formal operations of the parody. But what of its evaluative

stance? The word *sākhir* almost always implies a stance of mockery towards the object, and in

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[131] This and the following quotes from Ashraf Hamdi are taken from his interview with the comedian Bassem
Youssef, available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6COQTPwHbA8.

fact, Hamdi's stated aim was to "mock this style of thinking" (*askhar min il-uslūb da fi il-tafkīr*) – that is, to criticize the paranoid style of conspiracy theory. Nevertheless, mockery is only part of the evaluative work performed by his parodies, and it is an issue we will return to in the analysis. We will also investigate the "felicity" of the performance, that is, whether it achieves its aims of discrediting the rumors, or falls victim to miscomprehension.

al-Haqiqa waraʾ Waʾil Ghunem ("The Truth Behind Wael Ghonim")

Beginning in late February, 2011, Ashraf Hamdi created two YouTube videos parodying the rumors circulating about Wael Ghonim and other youth activists. The first, uploaded on February 21 and entitled "al-Haqiqa waraʾ Waʾil Ghunem" ("The Truth Behind Wael Ghonim"), responds directly to the image collages we analyzed above, imitating its technique of circling the apparent signs of the activist's connection to international conspiracy. The video presents a sequence of slides, each fading into the next, in which circles and arrows are animated to highlight different indexes of freemasonry, Zionism, and other suspect political movements.

The title slide (*al-ḥaqīqa warāʾ wāʾil ghunēm*) fades into the first exhibit: a photograph of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg sitting cross-legged with an Apple MacBook, opposite a photograph of Ghonim in a similar pose, also with an Apple MacBook. The Apple logo is circled in both, and a caption appears: "Just a coincidence?!" (*mugarrad ṣudfa?!*). The next slide marshals a startling array of evidence: Ghonim's goatee (his *laḥya* or beard) "confirms his membership in the Muslim Brotherhood"; his "masonic gel bracelet" is green, "which means he is one of the founders of freemasonry and one of its most important leaders"; his middle and index fingers execute the peace sign (or victory sign), and are separated by "exactly 30 degrees" ("What could this mean?"); he holds an Egyptian flag, but "is keen on showing its red color,

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which indicates that he is a communist"; finally, "despite his attempt to hide his agenda [*ajinda*],

it appears just underneath his clothes" – a play on the Egyptian Arabic word *ajinda*, which

means both "political/ideological agenda" and "agenda-notebook." A caption is superimposed

on the entire exhibit: "Is this all just a coincidence?!" The remaining slides reveal that Ghonim's

clip microphone is an "Israeli espionage device" – evidenced in a photograph of Israeli Prime

Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also wearing a clip microphone – and that he is suspect in the

assassination of John F. Kennedy – evidenced in a grainy photograph of Ghonim seated behind

the president. Ominous music plays from beginning to end.

With its simple but still professional design – evident in the animation, mix of media, and

flow between elements – the video differs from the marked amateurism of the collages it

parodies. A subtle element of play may be detected in the slightly indulged font (Adobe Arabic

bold), and the light bounce of the images against their backgrounds upon entrance. But Hamdi's

video is otherwise a careful imitation of the original. He "goes along in the same path" as the

collage-mongers. That is, he copies their vernacular, enthymemic practice of building evidence

up through pictures, signs, and circles to the grand conclusion of freemasonry: he makes what

Hofstadter called the "big leap." In an interview, Hamdi cheerfully ridiculed this practice as

istintāgāt wa alghāz wa ḥāga zayy difintshi kūd ("inferences and puzzles and something like *The*

Da Vinci Code"). The practice enjoys a provenance both local and global, since the book and

film *The Da Vinci Code* – famous for its detection of a grand conspiracy in an over-analyzed

painting – has enjoyed as much popularity in Egypt as it has in many other countries. Hamdi

shows that he, too, can wield such analytic tools. However, the artist marks his difference from

the original collages through what he calls *mubalgha* ("exaggeration"): the evidence-mongering

is taken to its extreme. The exaggeration takes a number of forms. Sometimes, the same piece

of evidence is circled, but it is given an exaggerated interpretation – the gel bracelet becomes not only an indication of freemasonry but of Ghonim's pioneering role in the organization. Other times, the exaggeration is performed by the choice of objects. In the original, evidence was drawn largely from ambiguous or unfamiliar objects; in the parody, Hamdi chooses objects like the clip microphone and Apple MacBook that a relatively unambiguous and have familiar meanings. Or, evidence of the totally impossible is concocted, such as the Kennedy photograph. Finally, the "grand conclusions" themselves contradict each other, as Ghonim is simultaneously connected to rival political groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and communism. Through these various forms of exaggeration, Hamdi stretches the interpretive practice until it breaks. He exposes the analytic feebleness of collages and circles, undercutting their claims of arriving at "the truth behind."

Ashraf Hamdi's second video appeared on March 9, and while we will also call it a "parody" of the Ghonim rumors, it differs formally from the first. Rather than imitating the image collages directly, it presents their content in the separate genre of television advertisement: "The Command Center of the Egyptian Revolution" (a fictitious group), in cooperation with its "Tunisian counterpart," announces the beginning of "a training course for the overthrow of governments" (*dawra tadrībiyya li-qalb niẓām al-ḥukm*). The phrase *qalb niẓām al-ḥukm* ("the overthrow of governments/the regime") is a more "criminalized" or illicit expression than *thawra* ("revolution"), and plays along with the exaggerated claims of the revolutionaries' criminality. The subsequent frames replay similar claims, announced by a female voice (Riham Zidan), and depicted in various graphic formats with text. The course is led by Wael Ghonim, who "ignited the flame of the Egyptian Revolution" with support from "The Muslim Brotherhood, Zionism, Iran, Mozambique, Afghanistan, Freemasonry, and a hypnotic spiral" (*bi-daʿm ikhwānī suhyūnī*

īrānī mūzāmbīqī afghānī māsūnī ḥalazūnī mushtarak). Icons for each of these conspiratorial groups are displayed, multiplying Ghonim's dubious links into absurdity with random additions like Mozambique and a "hypnotic spiral." The groups also, of course, make for strange allies, as they represent rival political and ideological streams. Students who enroll are provided with a series of items, each reflecting rumors and accusations made against the revolutionaries at various points. These include a meal from Kentucky Fried Chicken (*wajbat kintākī*), which pro-regime media personalities had held up as evidence of the economic and nutritional privilege enjoyed by demonstrators in Tahrir Square. Students are also provided with 50,000 Euros, a token of their foreign funding, as well as the masonic gel bracelet, masonic lion logo, protest posters, and a 2011 agenda-notebook (*ajinda*). The advertisement closes with the image of a menorah (indexing Israeli influence), and the names of the artists: Ashraf Hamdi and Riham Zidan. "Hava Nagila," the Hebrew folk song, plays throughout, also indexing Israeli or Zionist influence over the revolutionaries.

As a derisive parody of rumors, these two videos adopt a particular evaluative and political stance. In the paranoid image collages, the artist encounters the expression of an absurd "style of thinking" that needs to be countered, not necessarily out of any personal sympathy for Wael Ghonim, but because of the threat the collages pose to the reputation and message of the revolutionary youth. If the particular author of these rumors is unknown, it is easy to locate them as an important stream in the "noise" deployed by counter-revolutionary forces to win the battle over public opinion. Combating this counter-revolutionary noise becomes an important political act. Ashraf Hamdi thus adopts his critical, mocking stance towards the rumors. However, he finds himself confronting a style that he cannot counter directly with his own voice. To respond in a pedantic manner – for example, a carefully syllogistic article outlining the folly of the

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rumormongers' claims – would in a sense be hypocritical, since pedantry (particularly of the patriarchal variety) has always been the rhetorical strategy of the political regime that the revolution seeks to overturn. It is a violent rhetoric that the artist knows will backfire. In addition, as Hamdi explains in his interview with Bassem Youssef, his own artistic powers of exaggeration cannot compete with the paranoid style of conspiracy theory. Hence "the most appropriate way" (*ansab ṭarīʾa*) to counter such a style is to follow its own terms – to "go along in the same path" – that is, to imitate through parody. It is indeed critical mockery that Hamdi intends as his evaluative stance, and finds in parodic videos a potentially potent manner to express this.

But there is a risk in parody that I would like to explore, before returning to elaborate on the politics of Hamdi's work. Linda Hutcheon's comments on the "risky business" of irony apply equally to parody. Hutcheon, following Stanley Fish, calls irony "risky" because there is no guarantee that the audience will understand the artist's real intention (1994: 11). The reason for this is irony (and parody) says something that it does not mean. Ashraf Hamdi's videos "say" that Wael Ghonim is a freemason. They "say" that the revolutionaries are enacting foreign agendas. But they "mean" that these are in fact spurious accusations, and that the "style of thinking" which leads to them is absurd. But how are we to tell? This is not so simple a question. As I have indicated in my discussion above, Hamdi's parodic imitations are careful to reproduce the conspiracy theories. They differ only in their application of exaggeration (*mubalgha*) of various forms, and by such means aim to expose the fragility of paranoid logic. But this is still no guarantee that the audience will "get" (Hutcheon's term) the parody. There is no guarantee that they will comprehend the unsaid message that Ghonim is innocent and rumormongers are ludicrous. And in fact, this is a "risk" to which Hamdi's parody fell victim.

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In his interview, Hamdi complains that while most of his audience responded positively to the parody, a number of the commentators on his YouTube videos interpreted them as just more "evidence" of Ghonim's masonic agenda. (These comments do not in fact appear on the first video because, as the artist says on his YouTube page, the video had been deleted several times – presumably because of complaints lodged by offended users). Hutcheon speculates on why this might be the case – why parody might "misfire." She eschews previous explorations of the subject that have interpreted miscomprehension of parody as "incompetence" or "ignorance" – indeed, quite a number of comments on the YouTube videos berate miscomprehending users for their "ignorance" or for having "lost their sense of humor." Her own suggestion is that

> perhaps what is called ignorance (and even lack of practice or context) is simply a question of the ironist [or: parodist] and the interpreter belonging to different discursive communities which do not intersect or overlap sufficiently for the comprehension of an utterance as ironic [or: parodic] to occur (1994: 93)

Hutcheon uses the word "discursive communities" as widely as possible – there may be many, and they can be transitory, fluid, and overlap (or not). What she suggests, in other words, is that the comprehension of the artist's parodic intent requires that the viewer inhabit his same social group, or one that overlaps with it, and thus share the same conventions of aesthetic practice, frames of reference, and standards of probability. The viewer must also share the artist's sense of propriety, for even if he possesses an understanding of parody in certain contexts, he may fail to understand the parody of something he considers inappropriate. Ultimately, what these cases of miscomprehension reveal is that "discursive communities" exist other than those inhabited by Hamdi and his fans. It reveals a kind of shattered epistemic terrain: different worlds with different structures of belief, some of which accept as plausible what others disparage as "rumor." This would seem to point once again to the irascibility of *al-ishāʿa*, since to combat it

would entail the difficult task of bridging together different discursive communities. For mutual comprehension, for agreement on what is plausible, the communities would have to overlap. And yet, what these cases also reveal is that these alleged miscomprehensions were few and far between – indeed, the degree of miscomprehension may have been exaggerated. Thus the "problem" of paranoid belief, the problem of rumor and its degree of penetration, would seem much less serious that it is so often made out to be. Rather than "gullible masses," what Hamdi's videos expose are a few cases of YouTube users whose discursive communities happened not to overlap with his at a particular moment. A few might not "get" the parody in one viewing, a few may believe it is evidence of freemasonry, but this does not mean rumor rules Egypt.

"The Truth About Wael Ghonim" is a parody that risks miscomprehension while attempting to combat a dangerous rumor. Its evaluative stance is critical and mocking, but there is the possibility that this critique will not be understood, and that the combat will fail. This brings us back for another reading of Hamdi's evaluative and political work. The critical edge of the videos has been shown to be liable to misfire, and the artist understands this. What other functions might these videos then perform? As I have noted already, parody may enjoy a range of evaluative stances. So in addition to its obvious negative stance towards the rumors, I will argue that Ashraf Hamdi's work also plays with them blissfully, and that this has important political consequences.

The parody "plays blissfully" with the rumors: certainly by this I mean, in part, Barthes's notion of play as interpretation. But more specifically, what I have in mind here is the pleasure of the paranoid style that Ashraf Hamdi imitates, and indeed partakes in. There are several reasons for this pleasure. I have noted above Barthes's words on the pleasure of *enthymeme*, which derives from the discovery of something new in the ordinary, and Stewart's observation

that conspiracy theory is a practice shot through with the thrill of investigation and thriftiness. We may add to this George Marcus's assertion that the paranoid style thrives through its "revitalization of the romantic, the ability to tell an appealing, wondrous story found in the real" (1999: 5). That is, the realm of the ordinary and the mundane is revealed to hide glittering possibilities just below the surface, and these can be unearthed to give life more texture (a mixed metaphor, but I mean "texture": a textual, narrative density). Conspiracy theory is indeed a vernacular generic relative of romance, but made relevant and resonant through attachment to everyday objects: a gel bracelet, a goatee, a simple primary color: any of these can make life much more interesting, more storied, indeed.

It is not difficult to see how Hamdi's videos take part in this pleasure. They take it to an extreme, playing along with the original image collages, finding new connections and new links to the wondrous. This is all done ironically, of course, but the pleasure is as tangible as it is contagious. We hear it too in the "Hava Nagila" that carries the second video: in colloquial Egyptian Arabic, it may be rendered *yalla nhayyaṣ* ("let's rejoice/make noise"), an open invitation for carnival. It is apparent then that in addition to cutting critically at the rumors, Hamdi's parody also enjoys them, as must his audience members. In this way, what his performance reveals to the rumormongers is not just the absurdity and feebleness of their paranoid style, but also its pleasure. An optimistic reading would thus assert that the parody does not just leave the addressed rumormongers feel attacked and offended, but also offers a way for them to reconsider blissfully their own practice. If questioned, if mocked, the serious practitioner of the paranoid style may respond that he was simply playing.

So "The Truth About Wael Ghonim" is a parody whose critique remains, but it is a critique that does not cast its objects into a realm of irreversible condemnation and alterity. It

plays blissfully and shows that this play is available. This has important political implications that can be elaborated by returning to Michel Serres's notion of *parasite*. For Serres, *parasite* – "noise," which in our case is rumor – is an abusive guest. It interferes and threatens chaos. Certainly this threat cannot be denied: for the revolutionaries, the rumors we have discussed here not only ruin their reputation, but threaten to distract public opinion into fearful notions of conspiracy. These rumors are parasites on the revolution; they are counter-revolutionary. "Noise [*parasite*]," says Serres, "destroys and horrifies. But order and flat repetition are in the vicinity of death" (1982: 127). In other words, although noise is threatening, we should be careful with our response: to attempt its eradication is to tempt death. The rumors pester our revolutionary feast – as Hamdi says, "they enrage me" (*bitghiẓni*) – but to attempt a direct rebuttal would surely backfire. Fortunately, Serres reminds us, there is a way out:

> The parasite gives the host the means to be safe from the parasite. The organism reinforces its resistance and increases its adaptability. It is move a bit away from its equilibrium and it is then even more strongly at equilibrium. The generous hosts are therefore stronger than the bodies without visits; generation increases resistance right in the middle of endemic diseases. (205)

Rather than expelling the abusive guest, we must make space for him, and adapt to his presence. In the process, we, the host, become stronger. We grow together with our parasite, evolving into something new. This is the quintessential post-human ethic, which looks for ways of adapting to all variety of irreconcilable "others," not through isolation or antagonism but through a studied recognition of the space we inevitably share. It is also, I am arguing, the politics of Hamdi's parody. Rather than pedantically scorn the noisy conspiracy theories, "The Truth About Wael Ghonim" plays with them, that is, it recognizes their mode of operation and incorporates it with its own. It recognizes that, for the time being, malicious rumors are part of the political and

cultural environment. Rumors and revolution go together; they are part of the noise that pushes events forward, if carefully treated. The solution is to adapt through an ethical and aesthetic hospitality. This does not mean that Hamdi's parody abandons its critical edge – this is as important as its blissful play, and is what separates it from cynical submission. Rather it means that the critical edge cannot be bluntly and directly applied, lest the parasite retaliate and the rumormongers, stung to the quick, fire back out as sense of exclusion. The rumors remain alive in the videos, and give them an undeniable vitality. The result is the innovative and genuinely (r)evolutionary performance of "The Truth About Wael Ghonim."

Conclusion

Dr. Ashraf Hamdi's parodic rendition of the Ghonim image collages has been only one of many playful responses to counter-revolutionary rumors. These vary widely in their degree of sophistication, aesthetic technique, and evaluative stance. The simplest, found on a number of Internet forums and Facebook pages, merely create their own image collage to mock the evidential style of the original: for example, a photograph of Wael Ghonim wearing a tie, next to a photograph of President Obama who *coincidently* also wears a tie. More complex parodies have been performed by MonaTov – the unfortunately short-lived YouTube comedian who appeared early in the revolution, and whose fifth and final episode was dedicated to *naẓariyyat al-muʾāmara* ("conspiracy theory") – and Bassem Youssef, whose television program *Il-Birnāmig* ("The Program") regularly spoofs conspiracy theorists, while appending more serious commentary.[132]

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[132] There are too many brilliant examples to list here. Others include: the graffiti artist Kaizer; Mohamed Rabie and Yusuf Rakha in literature; and the Facebook group "Tallaʿt ishaʿa ʿala Abu al-Futuh innaharda?" ("Have you spread a rumor about Abu al-Futuh today?).

In a tweet on August 3, 2011, Wael Ghonim himself declared that "we are a people that have earned a doctorate in conspiracy theories" (*iḥna shaʿb wākhid dukturā fi naẓariyyāt il-muʿāmara*). As the revolution entered a new phase with the trial of former president Husni Mubarak, rumors swirled once again about his life or death, including a claim by an obscure public prosecutor that the man in the courtroom was an impostor: the real Mubarak had allegedly died seven years earlier. The paranoid style was generating fascinating new acts, and its noise was interfering with the cause of justice. Yet if the problem was not new, the responses crafted by a new generation of artists departed radically from those of decades of "combat." As I have demonstrated in Part 1 of this dissertation, representatives of the Egyptian state have for over sixty years repeatedly identified "rumor" as a mortal threat to both "revolution" and reputations. The dual violence of demonization and incarceration has been the dominant mode of response to what was perceived as an unbearable noise. The result, however, was what Michel Serres would have called a kind of "death": monotony, a sickened order, and an inflation of the parasitic infestation. These are not only metaphors, but accurately describe the cultural and political disorder of things under military rule.

In contrast, the anti-rumor campaigns of artists like Ashraf Hamdi seek incorporation over combat. In fact they are much less "campaigns" than open play, and they are much less "anti-rumor" than careful vaccination. The threat of noise is the same to these revolutionaries as it was to those of July, 1952, and the need to critique this threat is also the same. Hamdi's work critiques the "style of thinking" that breeds rumors, but it is not naïve, and recognizes their ultimate intractability. Parody would seem the most appropriate way to engage them: following in their own style, while simultaneously entertaining different evaluative stances towards them. The parasite is admitted as an important enabler of the work, and it has to be for the artist to

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survive. He lets it live so that he may too, but neither remains the same. They are transformed through artistic coexistence into something new. This outcome, too, need not be merely metaphorical, but it remains speculative. We may judge Hamdi's work itself to be Serres's "evolved" form, the positive and strengthened arrangement of things that emerges from a careful incorporation of the parasite. To say "evolved" evokes a particular evaluative stance – an elitism – that I do not intend. But I do argue that the parody, as an innovative balance of different evaluative stances and aesthetic forms, is an improvement over previous, dominant modes of aesthetic and political engagement with the "noise." It is a revolutionary form that succeeds in restructuring the relations between self and other, subject and object, problem and solution, art and the world.

In making these positive claims for humor and rumor in a virtual environment, I am sure to have raised some concerns among readers about having overstated my object – in particular, one in such a fashionable field as "the Internet in the Arab World." These concerns can never be laid to rest. They have been a perennial feature in the scholarship on digital or new media since, and even before, their inception. Two related concerns may be addressed here: the first, whether "virtual" forms are divorced from the "real" world; the second, whether overmuch attention paid to digital forms distracts scholarship from more important sites of resistance, art and politics. I have already addressed the first concern in Chapter 7, in my discussion of "Mubarak Mat," arguing that the choice between "fantasy" and "real" is a very limiting one. Very often, the Egyptian blogosphere is a space for play, for *liʿb*, through which fictions and fantasies are explored and grafted onto the real. The second concern can be detected in Walter Armbrust's recent review of the field of Arab media studies. Calling for a wider historical perspective on Arab media – a call with which I strongly agree – Armbrust asserts that "literature on new media

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in the Middle East focuses narrowly on post-1990s digital media – satellite television broadcasting and the Internet" (2012: 42). The footnote Armbrust attaches to this sentence, however, references only works on television. He is right, of course, that there is no shortage of scholarly works published on the Internet in the Middle East. And yet, with few exceptions (e.g. Al-Ghadeer 2006, 2011; Edwards 2011; El-Ariss 2010), this body of scholarship neglects the kind of intricate connections between aesthetics and politics that I have explored in this chapter. What I hope to have contributed here is a thicker description of space in the "Egyptian blogosphere" (*al-malʿab*), a more careful appreciation of form (including language), and a more thorough speculation about politics than is often allowed in the field.

Finally, the cultural forms I have analyzed in this chapter and the previous one present the scholar with a difficulty of a more general nature. It is the difficulty of *writing about* cultural forms activated in modes of play, humor, irony, bliss, and so forth. As Hutcheon remarks about her object, "the analysis of irony is usually complex and laborious … but the practice of it appears deft and graceful" (1994: 6). In part, this is a concern with forging a language adequate to the task of registering the complexity and capriciousness of new cultural forms that challenge established scholarly lexicons of subjectivity, agency, space, and epistemology. But it is also a concern with the appropriateness of analysis as such – the very urge to take apart these forms, route them through dominant paradigms of Eurocentric discourse, and re-articulate them in the terms and syntax of a superior meta-language. I have, of course, included the comments of the artists themselves to the extent possible. But a certain incongruence remains that is not reducible to mere "misrepresentation." Ultimately, I would suggest, ludic performances such as those in this chapter cannot be "analyzed" nor even "deconstructed" in an academic style, but can only be "played" in Barthes' sense of interpretation. Not analysis because they do not mask a "deep

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structure" or unfold according to a grammar, unconscious, or hidden hand detectable only by the scholar; not deconstruction because they have not the pretense of wresting meaning from the shackles of an uneven binarism. (They can be submitted to such readings, but at that moment the play stops, its special ontological and phenomenological status evaporates, and the analyst is suffocated). Part 3 promises only to have been an imperfect "play" of the game of rumor through its own, rather awkward medium of academic idiom and gesture.

CONCLUSION

"The monger of rumor is wicked by nature, aberrant in his ambition, sick in his soul, foolish in his philosophy, insolent in inclination, evacuated of valor, craven in creed. He drips with depravity and decadence, and spleen has lain as sediment in his bowels. He does not rest until he foams and froths, corrupts and corrodes … He spreads like fire through hay, he camouflages like a chameleon, and sprays his poisons like a slithering serpent."

– Anonymous

"There's something called a white lie, and it doesn't hurt anyone. On the contrary, it could prove rather helpful to people."

– "ʿAbd al-Qadir" (Yusuf Wahbi) in *A Rumor of Love* (dir. Fatin ʿAbd al-Wahhab, 1960)

Does rumor affirm or destroy? It is a false choice: rumor rends, repairs, salvages, seduces. It dives, and resurfaces; it burrows, buttresses, defers, consolidates. Skewed by the overturned carapaces of cosmic irony's rebuttal to the chase, it stakes its claims far from the expected tunnels and turrets of the social imaginary, while also sprouting there too, taking root, disentangling itself from the backrooms, and salivating on the limens of the political moved along one word further. Rumor is *in* public culture, it *is* public culture, not only its unraveling but its progressive knotting forward through strategy, combat, paranoia, and play.

But the balance of human judgment leans decidedly against it. Much work has been done to extract *al-ishāʿa* and its sisters from the order of things, and to justify their removal by a marshaling of testimonies – moral, aesthetic, social, political – on their collusion with disorder – a concept sensed first in the nerves, negatively, before enunciation – and care and philosophy are denied the chance, the coincidence, to speak of chance and coincidence and surprise. The above anonymous quote is typical. It appears on a number of Islamic websites, dating at least from

2007. My translation is made from the book *Rumors and Psychological Warfare* (ʿAbd al-Hamid and Nagi 2009: 12), whose authors have probably plagiarized one of several sermons published earlier online. The negation of rumor and its agents serves more than the immediate goal of public silence. Putting *al-ishāʿa* in the docks and giving it a sentence is one way for the would-be authorities of society and state to assert their ability to judge, evaluate, interpret, use, and abuse speech in public life. It is a prop against which one's own discursive power, credibility, and public persona are constructed, not once but repeatedly through complaints, communiques, rituals, and drama all crafted in the service of combatting rumor and concealing vacuity and vice. This is just as true for the politician as it is for the social scientist, whose unique ability to detect threats to the public, analyze them, and extract their essence provides him with an undeniable claim to the state's attention. Combatting rumor is also an art suffused with pleasure, as one cannot deny the untempered excitement an author must feel when pronouncing that the rumormonger "drips with depravity and decadence, and spleen has lain as sediment in his bowels." And while there are good reasons for the systematic animosity unleashed on hurtful speech, this is more often than not the expression of an unthinking reflex, which closes down the possibility for serious inquiry before it might begin, insulates the self from the charged social complexity that makes it a self in the first place, and misses the chance for an encounter with the inharmonious thresholds of progress and becoming-with-noise.

Much rarer are pronouncements of the kind made by Yusuf Wahbi's character in the 1960 film *A Rumor of Love* (*Ishaʿat Hubb*). The plot revolves around the boorish Husayn (ʿUmar Sharif), whose uncle ʿAbd al-Qadir (Yusuf Wahbi) concocts a rumor of his nephew's affair with the actress Hind Rustum. The rumor is a conceit to make Samiha (Suʿad Husni), ʿAbd al-Qadir's daughter, become jealous of Husayn, who is in reality romantically

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inexperienced, and so fall in love with him. The film is a veritable celebration of the affirmative power of rumor, and of *parasite* in its different meanings: noisemakers and difficult guests. Apart from the rumormongers, *A Rumor of Love* features Mahrus, a ventriloquist; Bahiga, a wealthy heiress who executes a plebian shriek (*ṣawwitit bi-l-baladi*) famous in Egyptian cinema; and Si Lusi, the spoiled (parasitic) youth, who sings in half a dozen languages, arrives as an unwelcome guest in the opinion of ʿAbd al-Qadir, and whose flirtation with Samiha is the noise that sets the plot in motion, motivating the counter-noise of rumor. *Parasite* and rumor also find expression in the names of the film's location and characters: Ismailia, the setting, is not only a port city (an archetypal node of rumor transmission), but also contains the phrase *ismaʿ lī* ("listen to me!"); Samiha, whose name is little more than an unvoicing away from *sammīʿa* ("listeners"); and Si Lusi, whose name slips into *salāsa* ("flexibility, elasticity"), *sūs* ("rot; parasites [worms]"), and *waswasa* ("demonic whispering"). *A Rumor of Love* is imminently subversive, undermining a dominant tradition of "combatting rumor" in post-1952 Egypt by rendering visible the art, *bricolage*, play, and pleasure of this irrepressible cultural form.[133] As an art, the rumor mixes different genres and technologies of mediation, beginning with backroom whispers, and advancing to photographs of celebrities (the Queen of England, Nefertiti, Hind Rustum), the forging of romantic correspondences (during which, like Gamal al-Ghitani's ʿAtiyya Beh, the rumormongers engage in forms of gender crossing, with lipstick and perfume), then purloined letters, telephones, and the talk of the town. As play, the rumor imagines a scenario at the verges of the possible, and it is victorious: Samiha falls in love with Husayn, and even though the truth emerges, the bonds of affection are unbreakable, and *A Rumor of Love* ends with the two lovers

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[133] *A Rumor of Love* also reverses the moral and etiological structure of the introductory "Tale of the Lion and the Bull" in Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ's *Kalila wa Dimna*. The jackal Dimna is motivated by jealousy to tell a lie, which is the cause for the separation of the Lion and the Bull, "two friends/lovers" (*mutaḥābbayn*). Conversely, in *A Rumor of Love*, it is a lie which produces the jealousy, which leads to the uniting of two lovers.

chased onto a stage, embracing in front of the audience, fantasy and reality united under the sign of *al-ishāʿa*.

These are two opposite views on a singular cultural form, and both are in a certain range of feasibility valid. My main objective in this dissertation was to remain open to the positive, affirmative functions of rumor, while also recognizing its complexity and essential ambivalence. No doubt any particular rumor could have any range of contradictory effects, depending on the actors involved, the temporal frame chosen, the spatial scope under consideration, the epistemic modality deemed important, and the political orientation or disorientation of the analyst. It is this ethical and political ambivalence of noise that I would now like to push further with respect to each chapter. In the chapters of Part 1, from the Revolutionary Tribunal, onto the anxieties of development and planning, and later in the final years of the Mubarak regime, *al-ishāʿa* was framed exclusively as a destructive force, "undermining the pillars and foundation of the Revolution," then derailing the designs of *al-takhṭīṭ*, and later causing a "painful flow of blood" in the body of the patriarch. However, it is certainly the case that for the agents of rumor, in each of these cases, the practice of myth formation was one of subversion leading to positive outcomes, or one of sense-making leading to the affirmative comprehension of an ambiguous universe or event. In 1953, the so-called "Trinity of Rumors" – Ahmad Nasif, Zaki Zahran, and Mustafa Shahin – if we are to believe the questionable testimony against them, might optimistically be said to have sustained a genuine, if short lived, sphere of resistance, a playful counterpublic built around a morally ambiguous cigarette stand. It is only out of almost total randomness, owing to the capriciousness and paranoia of state power, that their act proved in the end to be self-destructive (but was this the end? and where did their unexpected sentences and syntax take them?). If rumors were a painful wound in the side of the Free Officers, they were

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also in a sense a great blessing, for it was against and above them that they managed to claim a discursive supremacy, establishing, albeit shoddily and with great risk of popular rejection, the artifice of their proximity to truth and control. Indeed it might even be said that it was rumors that had brought the Free Officers to power, not only their own acts of discursive sabotage, but also the general state of parliamentary bickering, partisan feuds, backbiting and noise that would engender a popular desire for authoritarianism, if only in the short term.

In the chapters of Part 2, I analyzed rumors from a number of perspectives, with different agents and different intertextual and psychological wellsprings, as portrayed and performed by the literature of Gamal al-Ghitani. Characters in *Tales of the Foundation* and *Tales of the Treasure Trove*, notably ʿAtiyya Beh and ʿAbdu al-Namarsi, were drawn into the production and seduction of *al-ishāʿa* in ways comparable to the novelist himself in his noisy confrontations with actors in Egypt's culture industry. While I did not explicitly pronounce on the relative affirmative and destructive effects of these rumors, their ethical ambivalence can be noted with a review of al-Ghitani's feud with Faruq Husni. I analyzed the novelist's use of weaponized rumor as a form of noise, an act of sabotage performed when more conventional politics would seem to offer no room for maneuvering, and expressed doubt about the ultimate felicity of the performance. The failure of rumor is the result not only of Husni's uncanny ability to avoid capture, but also the ethical dilemma it contained: the anti-liberal content of the noise (a claim of sexual deviancy) contradicted the supposed liberal cultural principles in whose name it had been deployed. Moreover, the form itself (rumor, slander, insult) is one that al-Ghitani has often condemned in public statements, and therefore it might be said that this epistemic and discursive dissonance is also a cognitive one.[134] As a weapon, rumor had failed to defeat its opponent. On

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[134] See, for example, Gamal al-Ghitani's recent legal case against the literary critic Sabry Hafez for his alleged "libel and slander" (*al-sabb wa al-qadhf*): "Al-Ghitani Yuqadi Sabri Hafiz," *al-Hayat*, 10/5/2012.

the contrary, it would appear that al-Ghitani had been, perhaps unwittingly, performing an affirmative function with respect to the minister. In a 2009 article, the novelist expressed that his "conflict" with Faruq Husni revolved around the latter's concept of "cultural work": while the minister desired "cultural noise" (*al-ḍawḍāʾ al-thaqāfiyya*), al-Ghitani desired "cultural production."[135] Thus in becoming an agent of noise, of publicity and scandal and drama, he was in fact surrendering himself to the play as envisioned by his opponent, perhaps never realizing that for the culture czar, the czar of noise and deviance, every rumor is a good rumor. Michel Serres asks: "Who is the parasite here, who is the interrupter?" (1982: 14). "The parasited one parasites the parasites. One of the first, he jumps to the last position. But the one in last position wins the game" (13); the parasite is he "who has the last word" (3). In this game, between al-Ghitani and Husni, it would appear that the latter earns the title of victorious *parasite*.

In Part 3, Chapter 7 offered its own take on the ambivalence of noise, between the affirmative force of play and the specter of complicity and incorporation. In analyzing the virtual campaign "Mubarak Mat," my emphasis was on the former, owing to its engendering of a subjunctive alternative to the dominant myths and affective states to the incumbent regime, and ability to temper its departure into fantasy with a self-effacing irony and recognition of its contingency. I also considered the possible counterclaim that this performance, by reinscribing President Mubarak at the center of power, is not a departure from domination's bind but a submission to its terms and figures. It is conceivable that the noise made around the president, while ostensibly negative in design, served to perpetuate the myth of his domination over Egyptian politics, precisely at a time when his role was being exposed as a mockery of itself, and subservient to other hidden sources of agency such as members of his family or the military. The

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[135] "Al-Ghitani: Ashʿur bi al-Rida ʿamma Haqqaqtu wa al-Dhakira Qadiyyati al-Ula," *al-Hayat*, 5/25/2009.

critique that "Mubarak Mat" makes, according to this claim, would be blunted or inaccurate because it has failed to locate "real" power and the mechanisms of its reproduction. Finally, in Chapter 8, I investigated *ishāʿāt* launched against the icons of the Revolution of 25 January. These rumors and conspiracy theories were conceived as destructive, but again, noise is never so simple. In the short term, these negative social practices provoked the creation of responses altogether different from the violent rumor combat of successive authoritarian regimes. In the long term, to draw a lesson from Lefebvre's study of the Great Fear of 1789 that I described in the "Introduction," one might consider how false, fantastical stories in wide circulation created the impetus for an emboldening of the revolutionary spirit, and the increased desire for a new, more evolved order. The surprising conclusion of Lefebvre's study can be elaborated on in a future comparative study of the surprisingly similar rumors that emerged during the French Revolution of 1789 and the Egyptian Revolution of 25 January: respectively, rumors of *brigands* and *balṭaga*, of peasants and slum dwellers, of kidnapped children and abducted Muslim girls, of the death of the king and the death of the president, of foreign invasion and neocolonial plots.

In speculating on the relative affirmative and destructive functions of rumor, I recognize that a variety of equally plausible arguments may be proposed. Outcomes, trajectories, and effects are notoriously difficult issues to broach in the study of rhetoric and mass media, to say nothing of other cultural forms likes noise, novels, and academic dissertations. "[The] question of effects," Lila Abu-Lughod reminds us in her study of television in Egypt, "haunts all those who produce and study media and is, in the end, unanswerable" (2005: 26). The question is not "unanswerable," I would contend, only the answers must be framed as exertions in the Kantian category of speculative knowledge. Still the thrust of my dissertation has not been to decide

relative measures of good and evil, but to complicate previous pronouncement on the negative, destructive effects of rumor and to remain open to the pleasures of affirmation.

In the "Introduction," I gestured toward a reading of culture through *al-ishāʿa* that might trace, refigure, elevate, and interfere with different sets of action and subjectivity in the world. Culture is increasingly, and has been for some time, *shāʾiʿa*: widespread, ephemeral, shared, public, diffuse, a playful performance. Social and literary theory have long since released culture from the shackles of the text, the codex, and the work of art, and have made liberal use of terms like "promiscuous," "rhizomatic," "hypertextual," and "parasitic" to envision alternative ways of tracing and assembling the world, and yet, Where in the field of Arabic Studies (with the exception of the literary and cultural forms themselves) are these modes of knowledge production (and seduction) taken seriously? Where *outside* of Arabic Studies are they taken seriously? In this dissertation, while maintaining a largely conventional format for presenting my arguments, I hope also to have proven more than sincere in my gesture to *al-ishāʿa* as a mode of reading and writing public culture.

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